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The Witching of Dracula

The blood countess returns, and
even Dracula is filled with horror!

by Robert Lory



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THE WITCHING OF DRACULA

by
Robert Lory

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THE WITCHING OF DRACULA

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**THE WITCHING
OF DRACULA**

“Like mindless ones they move about the island,” the noble Ulysses said. “Not like men, not like the stalwart warriors they once were, but like animals. Like docile sheep, like slovenly pigs, they bleat and wallow; not like the men whose forms they still retain. I vow you shall die for this, sorceress!”

The men of whom Ulysses spoke cringed as the flame-haired Circe laughed. “You, warrior, shall not slay me. No more than these ones. Yea, they are mindless as you have said, and so shall you be when the feast of thought which I have too recently enjoyed has been fully digested. Then I shall have room for your mind, you who call yourself powerful!”

But Ulysses had his sword at the ready and, leaping across the rocky land which separated him from the evil woman, he plunged the blade cleanly through her center, and then was much distressed that his attack had no effect upon her continued life and laugh-

ter. As she again began to taunt him, he raised his voice on high to the gods.

“The gods!” she cried with a tongue of viper venom. “Your gods are as nothing when compared to those I recognize! Just as your blade is as nothing when compared to him who alone has the power to slay me!”

And, seeing that he could do no more on this island, the noble Ulysses asked Apollo for guidance and that evening, before the sun did set, sailed from that place called Aiaia, leaving the blank-staring warriors to their fate.

Greek manuscript, about 750 B.C. translated by Walter Thagoras and published in his 1953 monograph, “A Pre-Homeric Version of Ulysses’ Encounter with Circe of Aiaia”

CHAPTER ONE

It was as if the wolf knew that on this bright, crisp afternoon there was one who tracked him, one who was determined to bring him his doom. It was as if the animal knew the character of his tracker—or thought he knew—and was deliberately offering up a challenge against the willpower of the man with the gun.

The man was young and strong. "A fine young man is Janos," his father liked to boast to those with whom he shared his beer-drinking hours in the little Hungarian village by the side of the River Waag. "In the old days, the *old* old days, he would have entered the lists and ridden victorious into battles with the King of Hungary—any king of Hungary! Then there were chances for a young man to rise above his birth station. My Janos, he would have lived his life in luxury in some fine castle, you can bet he would have!" To which boasting there would be little in the way of

argument. All of his friends understood the old man and, though they had sons of their own of whom they were just as proud, they did not mention their offspring. Hearing the old man and his talk about the gallant men and their battles of four and five centuries ago was good to their ears. And the old man would get into those tales just as soon as he was satisfied that all present agreed that his own fine son was of such quality that he too could have been one of those heroes of whom he told.

"A fine, strong boy," one of them would agree, and the old man would plunge into his stories of bravery and bloodshed. The tales themselves might have been fact or fiction, the teller insisting that they were "God's honest truth" but the listeners believing that there was a bit of the made-up sewn into the fabric at the very least. But that was of no import, the fact being that the old man could really tell a tale—and, for all anyone knew, the tales he told were consistent with (or at least not contradictory to) the small amount of Hungarian history his listeners possessed.

Even so, now and again, when the old man would be boasting of his son's prowess with ax or gun, a listener would point out that there was one castle where a lad like Janos would not have made out so well. "I would have been better to be the lowest servant of a backlashing pot-merchant in those days than to be a bright-steeled knight up *there*." The eyes of the speaker would flicker toward the river and upward, for that was where the stones of the old castle stood to this day. "Aye," all of the listeners would agree—all but the old man. He did not like to speak

of the old fortress. As a boy, and later as a man, he had a dream that came to him again and again, a dream that told of a terrible end of himself within the castle walls. His end—or, in later years, the end of his long-awaited, long-prayed-for son.

Always had he followed the wisdom of the village people. Never had he ventured into the high hills from which the castle rose, albeit he was not alone in this, as the majority of the villagers kept a respectful distance from the place. Now and then, of course, some of the younger and wilder members of the community would make the not-long and not-difficult climb, some even daring to venture inside the place that figured into so many of the local legends. And, although there had been no problem—no harm had come to any who had taken even the most daring of dares, including the very rare occasions when two or three young men would remain within the high walls throughout the night—still the villagers felt such acts were reckless to the extreme. As for Janos' father, his very soul turned to ice when he thought of them—and of that castle.

"Never, Janos, *never* are you to do such stupid things! Promise me, my son—*promise!*"

Years ago the young man had promised, and thereafter in varying frequencies—no doubt related strongly to the frequencies of his father's recurring dream—he had promised again and again.

It was, then, as if the wolf knew.

Because the wolf was heading upward into the mountain that held at its summit the castle Janos had been forbidden to approach.

The wolf.

It had been plaguing their sheep for weeks now, attacking just their flock, it seemed. Smart, Janos had to give him that. Somehow, the animal waited until the dogs were no longer close enough to keep him from his ravaging quest. Six kills had he made, three of them in the light of day. Once the old man had seen him, another time Janos had spotted the beast. "A big one, with a strange white line of fur on his back," the old man had said. The description tallied with what Janos had seen. He took his rifle and, hiding himself, guarded the sheep in those hours when they were most vulnerable to the sudden jaws of the gray beast of destruction.

For three days he waited. Then, this morning—the bright sun affording no shadow of protection—the big wolf left the clump of trees and loped directly into the sights of Janos' gun.

The weapon fired. Once. Twice. And the wolf, untouched, ran.

With Janos behind him.

The first leg of the chase was swift, both for hunted and hunter, but then both began to tire. Janos initially wondered whether the animal was trying to trick him, to move him far enough away from the sheep he had been protecting so that the beast could double back. But it was not so. Each time the young man lost sight of the animal, it was only to have the gray flash of fur reappear again—further up the steadily inclining hill.

From the beginning, Janos knew where that incline led to, but that was no problem. The wolf would be dead long before he was within hailing distance of

the ruins that now were little more than a smudge at the height of the sun-bright landscape. That was, at least, Janos' plan. But the creature moved so unpredictably—not necessarily swift, but in zigzag lines that seemed to anticipate exactly when the lad's trigger finger squeezed back to the point of detonation of bullet from shell. It was uncanny—unnatural! But at four o'clock in the afternoon, Janos had expended at least ten bullets.

And the wolf ran free, tauntingly free.

The sun now was beginning to get lower in the sky, and Janos knew that he ought to be turning back if he wanted to make home by nightfall. But Janos wasn't afraid of the dark. Why should he be? Not only was he strong of body, but he had his gun. In any case, the countryside had little in the way of criminal activity. With the subsistence type of living all of the natives did, there was not much to attract the highwayman of other locales. No, darkness was nothing more than another time of day—except for the older people who saw in it something treacherous, something of death, he suspected.

At four-thirty, Janos felt the strain on his body, heard himself panting, and he enjoyed the feeling. Always he was glad when he had the chance to push himself to the limits of his endurance. Always he felt confident that those limits were high, so high as to almost prohibit his actually surpassing them. As for the beast he hunted . . .

It was odd, very odd. Now and then, as the animal left its hiding to cross an expanse between shrub and shrub or boulder and boulder, it seemed to look back. It? No. *He*. Janos thought. *Knew*. And somehow he

also knew that this was no young beast he was hunting, but one experienced in the wiles of the chase. In his years on earth, young Janos had seen many wolves—too many—but this one . . .

It—he—seemed now and then to look back. To be sure that the hunter still came. To taunt the hunter, to goad him to—

To what?

To follow.

If Janos were superstitious, he would have stopped right then and there, exactly upon the spot where the thought touched him. But he was not superstitious. A wolf was a wolf, and that was that. This particular beast happened to be smarter than the average of his species, that was all. But Janos—Janos himself—was a little better than the average young man.

Hadn't his own father always told him that?

Yes, but there were other things his father had told him.

The castle . . . never . . .

The wolf. Now glancing back, just like a man might do, over his shoulder. And now, as Janos pulls up his rifle to fire, slipping behind that outcropping of rock . . .

No, wolf. Perhaps you know. Perhaps you *really* know. But know also that Janos will hunt you down until you are dead.

The sun was just beginning its dip down behind the high hill when Janos spotted them. His wolf was soon to be in his hands, he knew that now. The wolf

had led the human directly to the place where the pack had gathered. Eight, nine—no, more than a dozen of them. Males, females, from full grown to two of them recently weaned, by the look of them. Janos laughed and raised his gun once more, this time taking careful aim at the one he'd been chasing. And, just as before, as he pulled the trigger . . .

But there was a difference this time. As before, the white-streaked wolf seemed to *slide* backward from the path of the bullet. But this time a strange howl accompanied the movement. Whatever the content of the message—and Janos recognized it for that—the entire wolf pack was on its feet. The message—or perhaps the roar of the young man's weapon—had startled them to action. As one body, they fled. They *fled*, they did *not* scatter. As *one body*, they swiftly moved up toward higher ground.

Up toward the castle.

He looked at it now, Janos did. The castle. *Don't you ever, ever* . . . And now he looked at the falling sun. Falling. It was time to return. He'd gotten closer to the castle than he should have. He now should . . .

But that gray wolf! The one he'd been following all these hours. It was looking at him, taunting him, *daring* him . . .

"Dares are for children," his father used to say. "For children and for adults who have not outgrown their childishness."

Perhaps. But here was a chance for the young Janos to destroy an entire wolf pack. Including that one beast that—

That turned and ran, as if somehow knowing that the young man with the gun would follow.

He followed.

It was time for the decision. *The* decision. He would not have many more minutes of light. There it was, the open space—the door that led into the castle interior. The wolf pack had entered it on a run. His gun had barked twice, and two of the beasts fell, but not the one who was the leader, the one he'd been following since morning. They were inside, and now he . . .

Reloading his weapon and glancing at the sinking red orb, he cautiously stepped to—and over—the threshold.

It was as if they *had* known the fear their human enemies held for the place. In the main entryway they all sat, resting their haunches upon the dusty stone floor, unconcerned that the hunter might follow. Then their mood suddenly changed. They had heard his soft footfall or, more probably, had gotten his scent. They rose and began to move further into the interior. But not before his gun dropped three of them in succession.

He could not miss at this range. Yet he did not take his fourth shot, staggered by the resounding boom of his first shots that burst back upon him in three thundering waves of sound. When he'd recovered, he moved swiftly down the hallway in pursuit, his bootheels announcing his coming with a cruel vengeance. But as he entered a large room, he was taken by surprise again—for again the wolves seemed not to be concerned. Surely, they seemed to

be thinking, the human would not *dare* to venture this far!

There were seven of them. His rifle killed two. By the time he'd reloaded, he was alone with their bodies.

Alone.

The intense feeling struck him, but he shook it off. No, he'd seen where the remaining five wolves had gone. Three of them were adults, one of them the marked leader. That was the one he had to get, the one he now vowed he would not return home without killing. That one, after all, was the killer. If he left it —*him*—alive, the whole day's hunt would have been for nothing. The two other adults, and the two little ones, weren't important. Nonetheless, they had all scampered in the same direction, so . . .

Again he followed them.

He found them in what might have been a dining hall, large and high ceilinged. This time they did not look as complacent as they had before. No, this time they knew the man who wanted their blood would follow. The howling began now as they searched for other exits. But there were none. At least, none that Janos could see.

He therefore took his time, calmly taking aim at his targets until the spot right before or behind the middle of their heads sat upon his barrel sight. Then he squeezed the trigger. Four explosions, and four lay dead.

It was then that he realized that one wolf was missing. The one he sought above them all.

And it was then he saw the gap in the paneling. It had been meant to contain a gap, he saw, as he

pulled the slab of rotted wood toward him. It was, without doubt, some kind of secret passage. In itself, that was not at all strange. In many of the stories his father told, secret passages of one kind or another figured prominently. His father . . .

Never, my son. Promise me that you will never . . .

But the *wolf*, Father . . .

And the darkness! It was now almost completely dark within the crumbling stone walls. If only he had brought with him a light of some kind that might . . .

Yes. His eyes fixed upon the rotting panel. It might well be that . . .

It took no great effort for him to pull free a long strip of the wood. If it now would take to the match . . .

It did.

Janos gulped. Somehow the flickering of the torchlight seemed to elongate every shadow of every crevice in wall and ceiling, turning the interior of the large hall into a place inhabited by claw-waving devils. Turning the torch only aggravated the shadowy assaults.

He laughed. Out loud. "Brave Janos," he said to himself deridingly. "If your father could see your flesh crawl now, he'd no longer be so proud of you as he sat over his beer!" And with the self-chiding there returned to him his sense of purpose. The wolf had gone behind the panel, and where the wolf had gone, so too would go his hunter.

His right hand holding his weapon at the ready, he gripped the torch in his left as he passed through the

opening. The floor, like that throughout the castle so far, was of stone, but with a difference. It slanted downward to his left. Only a moment's inspection revealed to him the wolf tracks in the thick dust—that way, downward. Cautiously he followed, anxious not to make any undue noise. To avoid alerting the animal, he said to himself. Not for any other reason. Not because his sounds might inadvertently alert anything other than the beast he entered to slay. There could be nothing else, wasn't that so? Of course, that was the case. Of course.

He had gone no further than about ten paces when he came to the steps. Down. He followed them, assuring himself that the tracks of the animal preceded him. The wolf's prints were the only disturbances the dust had known since it had come to rest upon the stone slabs. It obviously was new territory for both beast and man.

Down and down, the staircase beginning now to wind around to the right. Suddenly, a chill went through the young man, making him almost lose his hold on the torch, causing his left hand almost reflexively to cast off the burden of the firebrand in order to secure with all available fingers the weapon he held with his right hand. The sound was unbelievably eerie, but in a moment he recognized it for what it was.

The howl of a wolf.

The mournful protest of an animal that was trapped!

Seven paces more and Janos saw that his interpretation had been correct. Without warning, the floor flattened. It was a damp, dark room in which he

found himself—himself and the animal he hunted, the wolf now clawing furiously at an iron grate that appeared in the torchlight on the far side of the room.

Janos carefully bent down and leaned the torch against the nearest wall. Then he began to bring up the rifle to firing level. As he did so, the wolf turned toward him. Just as its salivating jowls came into Janos' sights, the great beast charged.

The wolf took the bullet in the neck, the impact sending him crashing against the bars that he had fought. Then he lay silent.

Janos, still watching the animal for any sign of life, bent down for the torch. Automatically his left hand wrapped itself around the first upright object with which it came into contact. Recoiling from the strange feeling of whatever it was, the hand opened and shot upward. The object fell to the floor.

It was an *arm!* A *skeletal* arm.

With the torch now in his hand, the young man's eyes widened in horror as he realized that the bone was connected to a full skeleton. A small-framed body, but there was no possible way that the fingers and the grinning skull were anything but the bone-construct of a human being. Could this be . . .

The Bathory woman?

This?

But the legend said . . .

He had heard it many times, of course, his father's account being only one of many—each of the villagers, it seemed, having been handed down the “real, true” version from his or her forebears who were around at the time, which according to all versions

was in the early 1600s. Although the particulars differed, there was a common thread to the story of the Bathory Countess.

The Blood Countess, she had been called, because of the torture she had inflicted upon many, rich and poor alike. It was said that she had a face and body that never grew older, that she fortified her own system by the life essences of others. Some said that it was the blood of other people that kept her alive; others disagreed, arguing that it was something other than blood—their souls—that she required and that she only bled some of her victims to death because the process made the corpses deteriorate faster. Or because she wished to inspire the fear that she was a dreaded vampire. Or because she simply enjoyed the process.

Nonetheless, Countess Bathory's career of horrid death-dealing extended for more than a dozen years. At the end of which time . . .

And here the versions differed sharply.

Some said that her case was decided by the King of Hungary himself, Mathias II, who inflicted upon her the final penalty. Others said that, yes, Mathias was considering action when a strange foreigner—someone referred to as the Dark Prince—came to the castle and ordered her end. Regardless of the source, almost all versions of the story agreed that the decree was the same. The Countess Bathory was to be walled up within the castle and left to starve to death.

All versions agreed on another detail.

The place of imprisonment was to be in the fiend's bedchamber.

Which was in the tower of the castle.

The tower!

And yet here—here in a room below the main level of the castle—here was a skeleton that might well be female. There were ways, Janos had heard, by which one could distinguish the female boneframe from that of the male, but he was not sure. Something to do with counting the ribs or the formation of the rib cage—or perhaps the way the hipbones joined or how the space between the legs, the groin, was shaped. But it could be that . . .

Maybe the stories were wrong, that she hadn't been walled up in the tower, but here? Or maybe this wasn't the Blood Countess, but one of her victims? Or . . .

What was he thinking about! His mission was completed. He had no business here whatsoever. He should . . .

But just then the wolf's head moved. Whether gravity was acting upon it or the movement was a result of a nerve reaction, Janos couldn't be sure. Perhaps the wolf was alive? Impossible. But he knew one thing for certain. He was not about to leave this place with the slightest doubt in his mind that the animal he had spent the day following was left behind completely and unalterably dead. Had the wolf's head not moved, there would have been no doubt in his mind, and Janos would not have brought his torch close to the animal. But the head *had* moved.

And so the light came nearer to the metal bars.

A moment's inspection satisfied the young man. The wolf was dead. But the torchlight . . .

It lighted the rusting, half-eaten-through bars

against which the crumpled animal lay. It illuminated the bars and the room beyond. A strange room.

No, the room itself wasn't all that strange. It was small, much the way one would expect a dungeon cell to look, and that is surely what the room was. The strange thing was the large rectangular box that lay in the center of the floor.

Move on, Janos, you should not be here!

It was true, he told himself, he should not be here. No longer, anyway, now that his job was finished. But . . .

He brought the torch as close to the iron bars as he could.

A very strange box. Although it was covered with dust, it still had very square corners all around. A wooden box would long ago have been withered with age. Yet there they were, the square corners—and the perfectly flat plane of its top. His own breathing now seemed to come back at him, as if the inner room beyond the bars were already full to capacity of air and could not take any additional. He strained his eyesight and tried to push the firebrand through two of the vertical bars in front of him.

Something creaked, the sound almost causing him to let go his hold of the torch. He looked to his right and saw the heavy hinges, then to the left and saw the great lock. Speculatively, he pulled at the bar directly over the lock. It did not open, but again from the right came the sound of metal against metal. The bolts attaching one of the hinges to the door had almost completely rusted through. It would not take much effort . . .

No, Janos. You must leave this place—at once!

But that box. What might it contain? Perhaps a great treasure. Yes, gold, perhaps—or jewels. If he walked away now, he might be turning his back upon a fortune. What was worse, if he walked away now, he would never know! He rested his rifle against the wall to the right of the hinges. He had to know.

He had been correct about the small amount of effort it would take. The door snapped free from the top hinge as if the connecting bolts had been thin twigs. The bottom hinge did not come loose as easily, but it came—after two sharp pulls. Far enough, anyway, for Janos to step over the place where the joining had been. Over that and into the room.

The box. It was long, about the size of a human body. Now, why did he have to think of *that*? Clenching his jaws together, he swallowed hard and pushed his torch forward, following it slowly. He coughed twice, holding back a sneeze. The thick dust in the room. It was getting to him. He should not be here, he knew that. No one had walked in this room for centuries. But it would only take a few more minutes. To see what the box contained. To touch its side . . .

He cried out in surprise.

His fingers had touched the side nearest him, one of the two short sides. The dust, of course, was not thick on the end, but it felt eerie to the touch. More eerie, however, was the feel of the box itself. It was some kind of *glass*!

Placing his fingers back exactly where they had been, he applied a forward pressure with his fingertips. The glass did not budge. He again took his hand from it. The glass was thick, obviously. Now crouch-

ing closer to the vertical surface, he used the sleeve of his jacket to brush the dust away. A chill ran down his spine as his forearm, although protected by cloth as it was, touched the dust. Another chill followed as, holding the torch above him, he peered into the cleared place.

Some kind of material. Something dark, it appeared. A kind of red something. More than that he could not tell. Not from this angle. Perhaps from the long side . . .

Moving to the length of the glass box on his right, he repeated the wiping process with his sleeve. This time, when the light streamed through the transparent pane, there was no doubt in his mind what that red material was.

It was hair. Long red hair streaming from the head of a woman.

The most beautiful woman Janos had ever seen.

CHAPTER TWO

Go, Janos—for God's sake go!

Go? Now? But this woman . . .

Quickly he brushed the dust from the entire length of the glass box, his eyes wide with awe as he did so. This woman . . .

She looked as if she were asleep, nothing more serious than that. She wore no item of clothing, a fact that frightened Janos almost as much as the circumstances in which he had found her. Young men of Janos' age normally did not have much of an opportunity for any type of sexual activity, unless they were among those who married early. Even though Janos himself had had a few experiences, he being such a good-looking lad, they had been hasty, looking-always-over-the-shoulder affairs, the girl—and Janos, too—deathly afraid that her father or a brother would accidentally stumble onto their hiding

place. Never in his life had Janos seen a woman completely naked. And now, this woman . . .

Asleep, that's all. Even though she appeared not to breathe, she *had* to be breathing, didn't she? But how *could* she breathe, inside that closed glass box that . . .

And now the full enormity of the thing he had found struck him. This beautiful woman—inside a glass box that, from the telltale dust covering, had been closed for many, many years! No one could live through that, no one could live all those years even if there were no box and no dust upon it. No one, unless . . .

Magic. There had to be something magical about all this. Janos knew nothing of science, or not much, but he was convinced that there could be no scientific explanation for what he now saw in the light of his torch. The woman was a victim of some treacherous magician. It had to be, even though he himself had smiled when his father told of the magicians in the old days, of how they did things that no man today could do. Yes, it had to be . . .

Something just over his head reflected the light in a sharp, brief eye-piercing shaft. He had to stand up to examine it, but so attracted had his attention become by the nude woman inside the glass box that he did not want to leave her side. Yet he knew he had to. He had to if he wanted to discover just how the box opened. He had to if he wanted to see just what it was that had reflected . . .

He saw both things at once.

It—the small thing that shined in the torchlight—was a smooth wax seal. Dark red in color, it was

composed of a single letter—a Gothic *D*. The seal covered the place where the top of the glass box rested upon the side. Obviously, all Janos had to do was to lift . . .

But there was something else. It had not been the red wax seal that had sent the light piercing back into the young man's eyes. No. It had been a small gold-colored plate that was fastened somehow—he couldn't tell just now—to the *inside* of the transparent side of the box, just under the seal. On the plate were some words etched into it. They appeared to be in old-style, but Janos could make them out. The message was not all that difficult to comprehend:

*Go. Leave her and live.
Interfere, and become her victim.
And thus earn the world's vengeance
Upon your soul.*

The words chilled him. It was as if he could hear his father speaking them, adding his oft-repeated warning. "*Never, my son, never . . .*"

But she is so beautiful! He wanted to scream his protest loud enough so that the old man could hear it wherever he might be. But one did not shout in the presence of such a . . .

Beautiful woman.

Yet, this place, the stories told about it. And the warning, the threat. The threat. Of course, that's what it was. A threat to keep anyone from releasing her. This poor woman, encased in this thing and doomed to stay there, just because no one who read those words would dare to . . .

There was something else on that plaque of gold. At the top a symbol he'd not noticed before. A crest. Three wolf's teeth under a crown, encircled by a serpent, or perhaps a dragon, the beast's mouth eating its own tail.

The Bathory crest!

Could this be . . .

No. No. All of the legends—all of them—said *she* had been sealed in the tower that had crumbled to dust long ago. This woman, then, was no doubt a victim of the Countess of Blood!

He looked again at the golden plaque. How many others had stood here as he did now . . .

No. He had had to force his way through the bars, remember? No one had stood where he stood now—not since the one who had stood here and affixed his seal . . .

A cruel man. Somehow, notwithstanding the Bathory crest, Janos knew it had to have been a man—perhaps a henchman of the countess. Nonetheless his cruelty was obvious. How could anyone take anything as lovely as this woman and do what he did? If, then, cruelty was the motive, was it not also obvious that *she* was the opposite? And, if that were so . . .

But the warning. *Become her victim . . . vengeance upon your soul.* Yet . . .

Think of it, Janos. For centuries she has lain here, awaiting *you!* Perhaps, just like in those old stories, it will take a magic kiss on her sweet lips to awaken her! And then what? Surely, her first reaction will be one of love—love for her awakener, for him who braved the curse inscribed on the golden plaque. And she will need teaching, too. Regardless of how she

lived before, regardless of all the wisdom she might have, that position and learning are centuries old. She will have to learn from Janos about this world to which she has awakened. *Wait!*

Suddenly he realized that he had already set the torch against the side of the glass box, that already his large hands had grasped the lid of the enclosure, that he was about to . . .

To lift that lid.

Well, wasn't that what he was going to do?

Yes. Of course, that's the way the trend of his thinking was going, but . . . but he hadn't been conscious of *actually* . . .

That was it. He wanted it to be a conscious decision. He wanted *her* to know that he had wrestled with the devil here this night, and that he had overcome the very Fiend from Hell himself in order to bring her to life.

To life?

It could be just the opposite, he realized. He'd heard stories about old treasures being found in caves in the Middle East, and when they were touched—or when the outside air got to them—they crumbled to dust. God, if that should happen to *her*!

But, no. The threat—*that* said it wouldn't happen. Janos did not know why exactly, but he was sure that there would have been no threat at all if there were no possibility of her . . .

Alive. Yes, he would bring her back. He would break the curse, bring her to life. Break the curse, break the seal—yes—lift the lid . . .

It was heavy, the lid was, but with a surge of his biceps he lifted it easily upward. Upward to the

point where it seemed to balance, to make up its mind whether it would plunge back down toward him or topple over to the far side. It toppled, crashing with an explosive roar, onto the opposite side. He had expected the lid to shatter into a thousand shards, but it did not. It acted as no glass with which the shepherd's son was familiar. It . . .

"Thank you," the woman said.

Her voice was strange. Even the phrase was put in an ancient way. Of course, he should have expected that. After all, she . . .

She. Her lips were curled into a strange smile. Her eyes, open now . . .

Her eyes.

Janos screamed. There was a feeling deep inside his head, as if—just as her eyes flashed brightly—he were losing something. His brain felt suddenly squeezed. "I—" he began, but stopped. He had been about to tell her what he had done, about who he was.

But he no longer could remember what he had done. He no longer could remember who he was. And then he could remember nothing at all.

She stood outside the glasslike box, smiling at the young man whose wide eyes were still, just as the rest of him was still.

"I should not complain, Janos," she said, well aware that he could make no sense of her words. "If it were not for you, I would be there still, for perhaps another three hundred years. Your mind has that much in it—the sense of time—and for that I should be thankful. And so I am. You shall serve me,

my savior, but I shall need more knowledge than you can give me. You, perhaps, shall assist me in achieving it—yes?”

But Janos could not answer. The woman laughed, smoothing her long red tresses, then touching her suddenly angular but still beautiful face. Her bright eyes scanned her surroundings, then stopped as they took in the golden plaque and the broken red seal.

She laughed again; this time the tones of her laugh filled the little dungeon cell and the underground chamber that lay beyond the iron bars of what had been her prison.

“I am again in the world, Dracul.” She repeated the name, savoring it as it passed over her tongue and through her lips. “*Dracul!* Once more, I walk the earth. *My* earth, Dracul. Shortly, but in my own time, you shall know of me—*again.*”

CHAPTER THREE

The man behind the bar of the tavern in the little Romanian village of Arefu had thought it strange that such a finely dressed and handsome-looking woman would approach his bar in the first place. There was no such woman and no such clothing—speaking in terms of quality—in the entire village or, for that matter, in the larger, neighboring town of Pitesti. Strange as that might be, even stranger were the questions she was asking.

“Madam? There’s not all that many castles around here, so I figure there’s only one you could be referring to.”

“Then tell me of it,” the woman said. She appeared to be impatient, as if—somehow as if—she thought there was a faster way to get the information she sought. The man behind the bar was suddenly very happy that there were so many others in the tavern with him. Why, he didn’t know. He was the

kind of man who would have liked to talk to such a woman all alone, but *this* woman . . .

"Tell me," she repeated. It sounded not so much like a request, but like a command. One that she expected to be obeyed. There was an implied threat in her tone. "Tell me of the castle."

"D-Dracula's castle," he began.

"Dracul-a," she repeated, allowing the last syllable to remain in her mouth for a time, as if she were tasting it. Then she nodded. "Of course. The son of Dracul. Yes. That is the castle to which I refer. What can you tell me of him?"

"Dracula? The count?"

"Him. The count."

The barkeep considered. "Not very much. I mean, well, he lived a long time ago. And died a long time ago, if history has any truth to it."

"And what do you think—does history have truth to it?"

There was a way the woman smiled . . .

His voice quieted. "It's not all that easy to say, madam. Not when it's *him* you're speaking of. It's said that Dracula is one of the undead, that he lies buried up there, and that when the night comes—"

He broke off. "It sounds silly to be talking like that, right here in the warm light with people all around us, but it's not silly at all. Believe me, madam."

"I have no reason to doubt your word," she returned. "I think, however, that I must visit this castle of Dracula."

"No! Please, don't be doing anything like that. Strange things have happened up there."

"In the past, you mean."

"In the past, all right. No more than *three months* in the past, though! I saw it with my own eyes, I did. The vampire appeared and killed. Most of the men of the village saw it, too.* Believe me, madam, our eyes did not lie. Always there was fear in the village about that place up there, but now nobody goes up there, not even during the day!"

But he could tell she was no longer listening to him.

Later, the village police official had the same feeling. The portly man with the reddish face well remembered the events of three months ago, he told the lovely lady who had come to his jail. "Whether the superstitions of those who grew up here—I did not—have any truth to them is not for me to say. But I saw things that made my mind a bit more open to such matters. If you really are interested . . ."

"I have come here from some distance, Constable," the woman said.

"Uh, yes." He opened the center drawer of his battered desk. A few seconds of fishing around inside, and he had what he wanted. A white calling card. He extended it to the woman.

"Here. This man—and his foreign friends, too. They know much more about what really happened here than they told, I'm sure. This one, though—he seemed to know local history, all of it, much better than the natives whose families have lived around Dracula Mountain for centuries."

The woman looked at the card and returned it to the policeman. Moments later she was again out in

* See *Dracula's Gold*.

the night. Within the hour she was on Dracula Mountain, her red hair streaming in the wind. The hazy moonlight guided her footing as she rose to the decayed battlements of what had been *his* castle.

She stood quietly, her mouth firm but relaxed, as she let the impressions of the place enter her mind. Yes, there had been death here, and fear . . .

The cries of men who came from below with guns and torches . . . the screams and pleadings of those whose blood was leaving their bodies through the slashed openings in their throats . . . And *him!* The tall, straight figure, the aristocratic face, the noble brow arched in amusement . . . the features changing into the nonhuman destroyer, the eyes of red, the teeth that now were fangs . . .

Yes, *he* had been here. But now . . .

More images, earlier ones. Under the surface of the mountain, in the tunnels. The crypt. A casket of metal and wood with carved heads of gargoyles and the simple letter *D*, which, for countless eons, had been his mark. The casket . . . she concentrated on that. And saw it open, saw *him* lying there.

"I would that *I* had found you such!" the woman whispered venomously. Then allowing her face to relax once more, she watched in detail the scene that entered her mind.

Two men, speaking a tongue she did not know. One of them a giant of a man, young, but his head completely hairless. The other quite old and supporting himself against the casket edge with the aid of a metal crutch. His legs appeared withered, useless, but there was a type of power in his thin face. Two men and someone—something—else. A large black

cat with bright green eyes. Yes. Of course, the cat would be there, damn her! And now the young man's hands . . . upon the stake that someone had plunged into *his* heart . . .

She saw it all, saw how they had brought him back, saw how they took him from the crypt.* Then the scene faded.

There was no more to learn, not here. Neither crypt nor castle could tell her anything more of where the Black Lord now lodged. She smiled. She had refrained from feeding on the minds of the villagers here because of his possible presence, but now that she knew he was not here . . .

Yes, first she would gain what knowledge she could here, that which might assist her on the next stage of her quest. It was clear as to what that next stage was and where it would take her. The contents of that little white calling card were vividly impressed upon her memory:

ALEXANDRU THORKA
University of Bucharest

* See *Dracula Returns!*

CHAPTER FOUR

It was some ten or fifteen minutes after midnight, eight days later. On the southern side of Long Island, the night seemed wild with fury. There were no lights on in the huge thirty-five room Westhampton manor that Professor Damien Harmon had had completely restored. Within, all seemed as silent as death. Outside the house, however, a fierce, cold wind from the sea lashed brutally at the tall pines that surrounded the great house and also at the other members of the forest that kept the main house and the other buildings on the ten-acre estate secluded from what otherwise might be the prying eyes of outsiders. Only a beclouded silver moon, which shone down intermittently this night, revealed that there was a house there at all, as the trees moaned their protest of ill treatment by the whistling winds. Yet even that protest was drowned out by the crashing fury of the thundering surf, which seemed to be

demonstrating its rage that it could not cross the remaining fifty yards and was thus prevented from engulfing the ghostly appearing structures of man.

The woman on the beach seemed not to hear the avalanche of sound. Nor did she seem to be aware at all of the blasts of icy air that pummeled her face and played furious havoc with her shoulder-length jet black hair and the long black cape that whipped like a dark flag behind her.

She sat on a large piece of driftwood, this woman did, but her manner of sitting was curious, her lower legs pulled up beneath her in a way that suggested an animal at rest rather than a woman. Some black animal—a sleek panther or leopard, perhaps—her dark turtleneck blouse and tight-fitting slacks adding to the impression. Even the milk-whiteness of her hands and the oval shape of her face did not take away from the image, for—although they could not be missed, the perfect face especially—it was the woman's eyes toward which all notice eventually was drawn.

They were strange eyes. Green or yellow-green in color, their shape also suggested something of the nature of a cat. At the present moment, as they stared unblinking out over the raging waters, they contained in their midsts something that spoke of loneliness—or aloneness, which is not the same thing. It was an aloneness that seemed to contradict her apparent age, which might have been in the mid-thirties, if it were not for those eyes that spoke of centuries. There was something else in those eyes, too. Something deep and unfathomable, something no man could ever hope to understand.

She did not turn her head, but she sensed him behind her. And without turning, without even so much as a nod, she let him know she knew he was here. He was a huge man, six feet five inches tall in frame about which were packed some two hundred twenty pounds of steellike muscle. Except for the thick eyebrows that loomed over his dark brown eyes, he had no hair on any part of his bullet-shaped head, yet this fact added to, rather than detracted from, the ruggedly chiseled features of a face to which most women were immediately attracted.

Most women. This one, of course, was different. Even so, in the few months he had known her, he felt a type of bond growing between them. Most likely, it had to do with the events of those months rather than anything else. He, after all, whatever else he might be, was irretrievably one born to a poor family in Spanish Harlem, one who managed to rise to the less than glorious position of rookie patrolman, only to get drummed out of the corps as a result of a trumped-up charge of possession of drugs. That was four years ago, and it might have ended with Cameron Sanchez cooling his heels for a long time in some murky prison. But Damien Harmon had brought his intellect and immense wealth into Cam's personal war, and they had won—if permanent suspension from the force could be called winning. Since that time, the big Puerto Rican had done many things; most satisfying to himself was the electronics education he had given himself under the professor's tutelage. But, for all that, Cameron Sanchez still was what he was. Only a man. While she . . .

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

He didn't say it loudly. Even with the pounding of the surf, he knew she could hear him. It wasn't necessary for thoughts to be put into spoken words in order for her to understand those thoughts, nor was it necessary for her to speak in order for her own thoughts to be communicated. Moreover, when she responded to Cam, as now, he could never be certain that he was *hearing* her in the sense most of us use the term.

"There is no need to apologize."

He joined her on the piece of driftwood, but was careful to sit so that their bodies did not touch. He somehow knew she did not wish to be touched at this moment.

"I couldn't sleep," he said, his own eyes looking out to sea. "I guess it's just that kind of night."

"Yes. There is something in this night. Something out there . . ."

He looked at her, this woman whose name was Ktara, looked at her unblinkingly gaze seaward. Home, he thought to himself. That's what she yearns for. The First Land of which she sometimes speaks—

"No," she said quietly, having received his thoughts. "It is not that. It is something else, something I cannot precisely define. The very air . . ."

"Perhaps," he said, "perhaps you're sensing the coming of an early spring. We could use it."

Her smile had only begun before it faded. "Seasons. Seasons and cycles. Yes, they exist. I . . ."

And then she was quiet. He sat there with her,

saying nothing himself, until she rose. Even then he could not answer her question:

“Do you know, Mr. Sanchez, what it is like to be really weary?”

“Sure I—”

But he stopped, because he knew that he did not know, not really. Tired, exhausted, yes, both physically and emotionally. But no one who had lived for such a short time as he could really know weariness. Someone like Ktara, however . . .

They walked to the house together.

Cam was surprised to find that since he'd left the house what had been but dying embers in the large library fireplace had been rekindled into a warm and welcome blaze. As he and the woman entered the book-lined room, the man, who sat at the desk placed against the far wall, gestured to the two glasses of brandy he'd just poured. That too was warm and welcome, Cam decided as he took a chair close to the flames. The woman sat also, her legs curled beneath her, but the chair she selected was well away from the fireplace. She did not like fire, and for a very good reason. Close proximity to flame weakened her powers. Cam had good reason to know that fact; it was one that very nearly had caused him to lose his life not very long ago on the rooftop of one of the buildings of the United Nations.*

The man at the desk was in his early sixties. But for the leonine mane of silver hair that crested his head, he had the look of someone ten to fifteen years younger. His seat was a metal wheelchair, not much

* See *Dracula's Brothers*.

of an improvement over the model he was confined to in the year 1938 when a New York mobster's lead pipe smashed his lower spinal column. But, even considering his useless legs, the man appeared to be anything but an invalid. His shoulders were like those of a bull, the deep-set eyes in his angular thin face those of a hawk.

Retired Professor Damien Harmon, possessor of immense inherited wealth, as well as two doctorate degrees—ancient literature and medieval philosophy—and a master's in physics, all three of which he gained before his mid-twenties, refilled his brandy snifter.

"The night is a disquieting one for all of us, I gather."

Cam noted that Ktara nodded but shortly. Lately it seemed that she and Harmon had become better able to communicate mentally, although she still admitted that she could not read his thoughts completely. The metal plate that cupped the front portion of the professor's brain—a second legacy of the gangster's lead pipe—had effectively screened off mental communication between the two, but lately Harmon had been working on a way in which their two minds might be brought into closer proximity.

"It's a matter of *sympathy*—the real meaning of the word. *Feeling with* another person in a way in which the conditions of one induce responsive conditions in the other," Harmon had explained. He'd gotten the idea when reflecting upon their recent struggle against a voodoo cult in Jamaica.* "A large por-

* See *The Drums of Dracula*.

tion of voodoo is what is called *sympathetic* magic—the needle in the specially prepared doll causing a pain in a part of a person’s body that is in *sympathy* with the part of the doll receiving the needle.” Cam had offered the observation that Ktara might have some ideas of her own about getting needles stuck into her, but the professor ignored his younger associate’s attempt at humor and chose to view it as misunderstanding, probably to give himself the chance to vocalize his idea more thoroughly.

“No, it is a harmony of thinking patterns that I want to achieve. With my own thoughts, because of the metal barrier between us, I cannot achieve this directly, since I do not have access to her ongoing thoughts. But I do have access to her thought patterns. She fortunately provided us with them months ago.”

He held up the book before Cam’s eyes. The younger man had no trouble recognizing the thin volume. It was the book that had begun the entire adventure months ago. *The Runes of Ktara* was its title.

“In here, Cam—on these pages—are centuries of Ktara’s thoughts. If I study them thoroughly—”

“But you’ve done that already,” Cam had suggested.

“True, but much of the meaning still is lost to me. The correct interpretation of the events and people she alludes to, that I have yet to master. When I have done so, I am certain the barrier between my mind and Ktara’s will be shattered.”

“Maybe,” Cam had replied slowly. “But . . .”

“But?”

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea. She can read *my*

mind. She can't read yours. I'd feel a lot safer if things continued that way."

He knew Harmon had gotten the point. Ktara, after all was said and done, still was a mystery to them both. Why she did the things she did was her business, a business she seldom shared with anyone. Her motives, her underlying psychology, would never truly be known to such as them. That was a major problem, but there was another. Cam put it into words:

"She could be a saint, Professor. Deep down, she might have nothing but the purest of motives. But she is not her own master, we both know that. So give this some thought: Through Ktara, do you really want to give *him* free access to your mind?"

But Harmon seemed not to have heard his younger associate. His eyes and mind were once more directed to *The Runes*.

He had been reading the book this night, Cam observed. The volume lay upon the desk, just under the goosenecked lamp, several pieces of torn notepaper marking particular pages.

"Yes, a disquieting night," Harmon repeated.

"You appear worried," he said gently to Ktara.

Again she nodded. "It is as if . . . as if there has been something . . . unleashed. Something or someone whose probings I can feel deep within me. As if these probings were meant to seek out and find . . . me."

The professor reached for the book, then thought better of it.

"In there—you talk much about the Old Gods and a time that is coming."

She smiled thinly. "No. There will be signs, and those signs have not yet come."

Harmon accepted her reply with no visible change of expression. "There is mention made of a Grand Magus. Perhaps he—"

"He—the one I mention under that title—would require no probings."

This appeared to Cam to be a new bit of information for his employer. He watched as Harmon closed his eyes briefly to assimilate it and then turned them again upon the woman.

"In which case, perhaps she—"

"She?"

Harmon frowned. "Unfortunately, you are not all that specific in your verses, but I've had a lingering suspicion that several of the women you mention are not different personalities, but one. There is Circe, for example, of whom the poet Homer had much to say—although quite differently from you. Then there is this woman named Elizabeth. I've been meaning to ask you about them, and about others such as—"

She cut him off sharply. "You *have* asked, Professor. Just now. You have my words before you. Those words contain all that I have to say on the subjects to which they pertain until—"

"Until, perhaps, it's too late."

She looked at the hard lines of his face for what seemed a long moment.

"Perhaps, Professor Harmon. Perhaps."

The following day, Thorka's letter came.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dear Damien,

As I begin this letter I have no idea as to what length it will reach. Indeed I cannot be sure I shall be alive long enough to finish it! Words that read like those of a desperate man, I know full well, but that is what the writer of these words has become—a most desperate man, one who is running (the German postmark and return address surely has not missed your notice) and who knows not exactly from whom or what he runs. It has been only one day since I departed Bucharest, thus the memory of what I am about to relate to you is most vivid in my mind; so vivid, in fact, that I can feel the cold fingers of terror grip my spine anew in the telling.

The night before last, I was working in my office at the University, the nature of the work being of low importance, in that it consisted entirely in pre-

paring a series of lectures to lower classmen, whose curricula specified that, in the interest of a well-rounded education, they have a small but innocuous dosage of introductory anthropology. As it was in the very late hours, I was surprised when my office door opened and a young man named Gheorghe Mitran, an instructor in anthropology here, stumbled into the room. At first I thought that he, like I, was working late to finish a similarly distasteful task, as he too begins a similar round of introductory lectures next week, but his manner soon dispelled that notion from my mind. His eyes were wild, his facial muscles—indeed, all of his bodily movements—appeared disjointed, as if he could not control them as he wished. Worst was his voice, which had a sandpaper quality to its gruffness, a quality quite undetected by me in young Mitran for as long as I'd known him.

"You must come with me, Doctor," he said. I, thinking that perhaps he was drunk, told him that I was busy and that whatever he had in mind could wait until the following day.

"Now, this night, you must come. She cannot wait until tomorrow," he insisted.

When I inquired as to who this she was, he roared like an animal and charged at me, grasping my shoulders and, with a strength I had not suspected resided in the physique of the frail young man, pulled me from my chair and dragged me halfway over the top of my desk before I fully realized what was happening. Once I did, however, my own strength was sufficient to wrench myself free and to

position myself back again where my desk was between us. I ordered him to compose himself.

But such was his madness, or madness at least it seemed to me, that he could not. He had begun to salivate. Again he insisted I go with him. "She requires your knowledge," he said, adding something—I can not recall the precise words—about her not being able to consume me now. "Her mind is full for the moment." That statement I recall only too well because it was next to his very last.

Like an enraged animal he then charged, taking the desk at a single bound. Reacting more from the reflex of fear than anything else, I fumblingly dislodged one of my collection of Italian daggers, which is displayed on the wall behind my desk, and held it between myself and my attacker. As heaven is my judge, in Mitran's attempt to grapple with me, he drove his own breast upon the point of the weapon until his rib cage halted at the dagger's hilt. He cried out in pain, just as I cried out in the horrible recognition that I had slain this young colleague. As he sank to the floor, his eyes for one brief moment cleared. "God save you, Dr. Thorka," he said. "God save your mind!"

And then as I looked at the bloodstained steel that I had pulled from the young man, my eyes beheld the impossible. Flames, strange flames with a cold-white quality, sprang up on the spot where he lay, sprang up and began to turn his body to ash! Hot though the fire must have been—must have been!—I could feel no heat emanating from it. Possibly the heat was there, and my shocked senses did not register it. The question is moot, however, since without doubt all of

my senses suffered shock when the strange flames, as mysteriously as they had appeared, died just as mysteriously. They simply disappeared, and along with them the body of Mitran. Of him there was no trace, none but the fast-drying blood on the shaft of the weapon that had killed him. He had been—to use the term he himself had used—completely consumed.

What happened directly after that I am not certain. I know that I ran, know that I still clutched the weapon in my right hand, but I do not remember moving through the building corridors. Yet I must have done so, because when some measure of clarity returned to me, I found myself outside on the University grounds. Someone called my name and, without questioning my action, I halted. As I did, from the shadows some distance from me a figure moved into the moonlight. It was a woman, attired in a long cape. She had long red hair and a face that might well be the most beautiful I have ever seen. I cannot make this point at all surely, since something within me insisted that I not dwell on that face for an instant more than I already had. The woman seemed aware of my reluctance. She laughed, an evil laugh that, although not loud in itself, crossed the distance between us with its fullness, seeming to surround and hold my very soul in its icy substance. “You are a fool, Alexandru Thorka,” she said.

“A fool,” she repeated. “But a lucky fool. Fortune smiles upon you that I cannot now take from you what I desire, but there shall be another time. So, save yourself, Thorka. Tell me what I wish to know. In Arefu they told me you know where he is. Tell me!”

It was, I think, the harshness of her command that jarred me into action. Again I ran, and as I did, I imagined (?) I could hear her voice still speaking softly to me from the distance. "There shall be another time, Thorkal" were her menacing words, words that I cannot but believe.

The remainder is best briefly told. After burying the dagger (a prize I someday hope to reclaim), I contacted some influential friends who, although curious at my sudden and urgent desire to visit Germany, yielded to that desire and made the necessary arrangements. In a matter of hours, I was on my way. But such agonizing hours they were, my friend, each moment of them spent in looking over my shoulder, wondering if this would be the moment when . . .

When what?

I do not know, but I feel deep within myself that I am not safe even yet. Her warning remains etched upon my brain.

You will see by the return address the place where I am staying. I await your response without being sure in my own mind what form that response should be. Yet I have the feeling that the he of whom the woman spoke is that one of whom we both know well. Can you help me, Damien? And if you can, in heaven's name how? Somehow I feel that I have more to lose than just my life, and somehow I know that unless something is done, there is no place on this earth I can hide where I cannot be found.

My old friend, this letter has turned out longer than I meant it to be. I only thank God I have lived the moments it has taken me to write it.

Alex

Cam returned the letter to the professor. There was no doubt in his mind that Harmon would do everything he could to help the thick-bodied man with the close-cropped salt-and-pepper beard and the twinkling eyes. Even had not Alexandru Thorka been instrumental in helping them the two times they had been to Romania—helping them even when he was not exactly sure what they had as their mission—Harmon did not take friendship lightly.

“I’ll make the arrangements,” he said to his employer.

The professor nodded. “You react as I react, Cameron.” He looked at the woman in black. “And you?”

“Red hair,” Ktara said simply.

“That is all?”

“For the moment, yes,” she replied. “Except for one observation. I have always thought Dr. Thorka to be no one’s fool. His words—and the actions he’s taken—prove I have been right.”

“And regarding our helping him?”

She looked at Harmon. “That is not for me to say. And the sun is hours from dying.”

The professor turned to Cam. “Make the arrangements. We can leave a couple of hours after dark.” To Ktara: “Or am I to expect difficulty from *him*?”

“That also is not for me to say,” she returned softly.

The setting sun. From the study window, Cameron Sanchez watched the bloodred ball as it slowly moved on its everyday course downward toward the horizon. His thoughts reflected on how the daily disappearance of that light of the heavens was taken for

granted by all but the very few. Some there were, no doubt, on this island or within the concrete-canyoned metropolis to the near west, who at this moment were looking forward to the coming of the darkness—these yearnings in terms of a date with a new partner, a night at the theater to view a well-received play. Some there were, too, who welcomed the night as their hours of business, some of which was business best performed in the black hours. In the city tonight—and on this island as well—there would be killings, planned and unplanned, connected with robberies and connected with simple human passion. But here, right here in this house upon the southern Long Island shore, night was awaited for another reason, not however completely unconnected with the black specter of death.

“It is time,” Ktara said.

As she walked from the study into the hall, Cam followed, pushing Harmon’s chair before him. All three moved inside the special elevator that gave the crippled owner of the manor access to all three floors above ground level and to the large basement below. It was the bottom button on the panel that Cam now pushed. There was a slight *whir*, and the car moved downward.

Its almost silent descent was followed by an even more quiet opening of the panel. The three lost no time in moving toward the center of the huge room, this combination electronic and chemical workshop whose all-white interior was lined with shelves of instruments and glassware. As they did so, the beginnings of another night of Nature on the rampage began to make themselves known, the sounds of wind

and surf seemingly unblocked by the thick stone walls.

It was a damp room, this white workshop, and one that seemed perpetually dark, regardless of the brightly painted walls and ceiling and the strong fluorescent lighting. There might well have been a short time—between the manor’s refurbishment and the owner’s return from Europe when this subground room felt comfortable. Cam didn’t know about that: the feel of the room hadn’t seemed important then. All he knew was that when he returned there was nothing comfortable about it. “It’s the proximity of the sea,” Harmon had told him once, but Cam knew better. It was not a dampness of Nature, but of the *unnatural*. And the thing in the center of the room, he was sure, was the cause.

The outside crate, long and narrow. And what was inside.

For a brief moment, Harmon’s eyes concentrated. That was all it took for his limited telekinetic power to move the small lever of the solenoid implant under his rib cage. The wave of energy being emitted by the cell stopped instantly, causing a reaction—a *sympathetic* reaction, Cam now thought—in another unit that was implanted in another being. The second unit, small like the first, operated to withdraw a tiny wooden sliver from the second being’s heart. The sliver had been taken from a larger piece of wood. A stake that had been withdrawn from that very same heart.

The top of the crate was now open. Inside was the soft white satin that lined the four vertical interior

walls; covering the bottom was a thick carpet of rich, damp earth.

Ktara had gone to one of the shelves and had returned with a glass bottle of medium size. "You require nourishment, Master," she said.

The man she addressed was tall, well formed, and elegantly attired in evening clothes. His face was that of a nobleman, his high brow topped by black hair combed straight back, his eyebrows arched with an amusement that matched the half-smile on the lips below the aristocratic Roman nose. His skin was white, whiter than that of the woman, yet there was a shroud of darkness that pervaded his presence. There also was the aura of strength. Not solely the strength of his physique, which was at least a match to that of the giant Sanchez, but the strength of mind as well. Yet, imposing as this figure was, Sanchez and Harmon had seen another figure—or the same figure *transfigured*—which increased the man's power tenfold. That was when the widow's peak hairline moved down to almost touch what had become bushy, untrained brows. That was when the nostrils flattened, and the lips pulled back to reveal teeth that no longer were teeth but truly the savage fangs of a flesh-rending beast. That was when the red-black eyes flashed with white centers and focused on their human prey, who had hardly a prayer for survival—even if the prayer could be uttered in the instant before total destruction visited the victim.

Count Dracula shook his head slightly. "No. Nourishment can wait," he told the woman. "Especially if that is all I am to be offered this night."

The red fluid in the bottle was a synthetic. A

chemical triumph for Harmon, it was held in disdain by the count. In the earliest days of their relationship, he had smashed several containers of the fluid, refusing to touch it, maintaining that his system could afford to wait "a little longer" for the real thing. As events had turned out, he had been right. He had gotten plenty of the real thing.

Real human blood.

Ktara set the bottle aside. "Later, then," she said.

The count nodded. "Then I have not been brought from my resting place for the usual reason?" His half-smile turned to the professor. "You have not selected a new target for your vengeance?"

Harmon smiled back. "You are eager to destroy for me?"

Dracula's face hardened. "You know better than that. But I would think you would be utilizing your—ah—special weapon to the fullest extent possible. The month of the year is March, is it not?"

"It is," Harmon replied.

"And does that not have a special significance? Namely—"

"Namely," the professor interrupted, "that our bargain is complete at this month's end. Namely, that the six months of your servitude to me is over very shortly."

The count smiled fully, his sharp eyeteeth reflecting the light of the fluorescents. "It was a wager, and I lost it.* I have lived up to my end of the bargain, my solemn word given that I would not attempt to escape your control. You have reaped many benefits

* See *The Hand of Dracula*

from this situation, Harmon, not the least being that you could sleep peacefully at night. But now—”

“March is not yet ended,” Harmon said quietly.

“But it will end, Professor. And when it does—”

“Sabor,” Ktara said quietly.

The word struck the vampire like a bombshell.

“Is that her name—her *real* name?”

The professor’s question followed a pause. Not a long pause, but long enough for Ktara to have filled her master’s mind with what he needed to know. He himself had not the mind-reading powers of the woman, but he did not need them. He had the woman.

“Is that her real name?” Harmon repeated.

Dracula shrugged. “Her real name? The famous English poet asked a question about the importance of a name, but he never really answered it. Not to my satisfaction, at least. He missed the point, just as do all the romantic philosophers who have dwelt on his supposedly immortal words since he uttered them. What’s in a name? *Power*, Harmon, *that* is what is in a name—if it is the right name and if it is used appropriately!”

“Sabor,” Harmon said without emotion.

Dracula’s eyes flashed.

“Sabor. The name by which I first knew her . . . a long time ago. She was a priestess among those whose civilization between the ancient Tigris and Euphrates your scholars judge to be one of the first, a judgment that stems from the ignorance to which even your best scholars are subject, Professor! But, yes, then she was Sabor. She has had

other names since, and perhaps before, but that is the name I know her by. I, too, have had other names, but that is of little importance. What is important is that, in our encounters until this time, I have subdued her. I have won, and I must win again. Her power, Harmon, is—”

He stopped and shook his head. “Her power is something you have not the intelligence to understand.”

“Try me.”

The vampire smiled. “I have an ability. I remain alive because of it—namely, my ability to gain sustenance from the blood of others.”

Harmon nodded. “It seems I have enough intelligence to absorb that.”

The count bowed, but the gesture was one of mockery. When he straightened, his face was serious. “Sabor, however, also has an ability. As I gather into my system the blood of others, she gathers into hers the knowledge of others. Thoughts, Professor, she feeds on thoughts.”

“It would seem,” Harmon said slowly, “that her main mission is you. From what I gather from what Dr. Thorka’s letter says—”

“It is true. Sabor and I are sworn enemies. She knows I will not allow her to continue active existence. She therefore knows that she must try to eradicate my presence on this world in order for her to prosper. It is that simple.”

“Not quite,” Harmon disagreed. “I could let it happen. As you yourself said, our six months’ arrangement is almost over. You know I will not allow

the most remote possibility of your roaming the earth without the restraints you have had so far.”

Dracula’s smile was genial. “You would let this friend of yours—this Thorka—die?”

The professor glanced at Ktara. Obviously, she had told her master everything. The glance was fast. So was his reply to the vampire:

“He is an old man.”

“He is an old *friend!*” Dracula countered. “You are a fool in many ways, Professor, but you will not stand idly by and allow one whom you consider to be a true friend to die—not when you can prevent it!”

Harmon was silent, his face expressionless, his eyes seeming to measure the amount of concern on the face of the tall nobleman. The silence lasted for five of Cam’s heartbeats, then it was over. A reddish coloring spread from the count’s upper jaw. His eyes flashed in rage.

“Harmon, I warn you. This world of yours—this globe that you seem to cherish. It dies if I die, *it dies with me!*”

The professor chuckled. “Unacceptable. You have died before—several times if Ktara’s *Runes* are factual—and the world has gone on. In fact, one might claim it has been better for your absence. I see no reason why I should bother myself or—”

The vampire’s voice boomed above the thundering surf: “You will *bother* yourself to any lengths possible! That is how far you *will* go!”

“I am in command here, Count Dracula,” Harmon said quietly.

The threat was obvious. A simple instant of concentration and the sliver of wood would be back in

place, the inert form of the vampire on the floor of the basement laboratory. The threat was missed by no one, including the count himself. His tone quieted:

"Very well, Professor Harmon. For the first time in our relationship together, our roles are reversed. She is on one continent, I am on another. You must assist me in getting to her before it is too late."

"Why?" Harmon asked simply. "Why, in this final month of our agreement, must *I* suddenly assist *you*?"

The count stepped forward a pace, extending a long index finger toward the professor's head. Harmon, on his part, was already prepared to mentally thumb the implant lever within him, which in turn would drive the tiny sliver into the vampire's heart—but the count was merely gesturing. It was not a threatening motion. Not yet.

"Your brain, Harmon. For a human brain it is somewhat advanced. It contains much knowledge. Yet you will admit that there are certain other brains in your world, and, if she could master these—if she could erase every thought in these brains and make those thoughts her own—what could she not do? Even as we talk here, wasting precious moments, she may have gained the knowledge that might lead her to specialists in the creation of nuclear weaponry. It has been a long time, Harmon, but once again the world is at an age when the simple touch of a finger can bring on the holocaust that would spell the doom of the entire planet. Your friend, Dr. Thorka—he is right to be frightened."

"As you are frightened, Count?"

The vampire's eyes narrowed. "I am frightened, yes, but not for the same reasons as you should be. I have my own rendez-vous with time, which your petty problems shall not defray. But she—*she* could destroy this entire world before . . ."

His sentence faded. Harmon picked it up:

"Before you complete your so-called work? The work for which you hoard your gold? What is that mission, Count—precisely *why*—"

This time it was Ktara who interrupted:

"My *Runes* have said something of my master's mission. He shall speak no more of it, nor shall I. Not until the time comes when things must be said. That time has not yet come."

Her tone had been steady, but there now was added to it another quality, which might possibly have bordered on the pleading:

"Professor Harmon, I add my voice to that of my master. I know you have great feelings for Dr. Thor-ka. I would have expected you to help him because of those feelings alone. Now it appears that you waver from this goal, perhaps because you are suspect of my master's motives."

"Have I had any reason not to be suspect?" Harmon asked.

"Professor, that is for you to say," she replied. "I, for my part, say this: In what must be done, your desires and those of my master are identical. You *must* join us against Sabor!"

"Sabor," Harmon repeated reflectively.

"Or—" she began.

"Or Circe or Lilith or Jao Q'wi or—"

Dracula laughed. "Perhaps, Professor Harmon, I

have underestimated your intelligence. Nonetheless, if it is confirmation you are asking, you ask too much."

Harmon smiled good-naturedly, but there was something behind the expression that Cam had come to recognize as a different, almost opposite quality.

"Too much, Count? Then I withdraw what in reality was not a question, but a statement. We leave this night, but first"—and now the smile did turn semi-sardonic—"first, I think we should toast our success. Cameron, I believe we have wine here somewhere, do we not?"

"I do not like wine, Professor," Dracula said.

Harmon nodded. "I'm well aware of that, Count, and so I shall not force any upon you, albeit of the finest vintage. No. But because this is a mission that is unlike the others, in that I wish no normal human being slain, I insist that before it begins you drink your fill—of another beverage."

Ktara already had the top off the bottle.

Dracula's eyes flashed fire. Looking from the bottle back to the man in the wheelchair, he bowed in a halfhearted manner. "One day, Professor, it will be your blood that nourishes me."

Harmon's facial expression did not change. "As Ktara has said in another context, Count, that time has not yet come. Time nonetheless moves. I suggest you drink up."

"Of course," the vampire said with an amused smile, one that might not have been half so amused had he heard those same words spoken halfway around the world four days previous, by a man whose name he did not know.

CHAPTER SIX

"Of course . . . of course," Petre Ulescu said into his office telephone as he glanced at his watch. It was eight in the evening. "Yes, yes . . . I *do* understand. I understand completely. I will be there—yes, sir. I know, sir, the ambassador is a most important person who can do the University all the good in the world. Yes, sir. Eight-thirty at the very latest . . . Yes, sir."

He replaced the phone upon its cradle. Damn it! The chancellor acting as if it were *his* fault! And he—stupid being that he was—not telling the old boy to jump into the Danube! Petre Ulescu didn't have to be here at the University, didn't even have to be in Bucharest. His up-country farm could support him easily, and, in fact, during the past week was looking more and more inviting by the minute. He did not need all this, not at all!

Damn Thorika—and young Mitran as well. Both of

them, skipping out on some fool's holiday, irresponsibly leaving him to cover their lecturing assignments. Their *unprepared* lecturing assignments! He'd see to it that Mitran lost his tenure for this. As to Thorka, well, what could one do? *Nothing* was what one could do! The old so-and-so was the University's resident genius, who came and went as he pleased. But at least the old genius so-and-so could have had the courtesy to mention that he'd be taking off and would not be able to keep his commitments. That he could have done at the very least, even the day before those commitments began. But no.

No, Thorka simply didn't show up at his Monday morning lecture. So the call was put through to Dr. Ulescu: "Rush to the auditorium and tell the mop-haired students gathered there something regarding the beauties of introductory anthropology." Small matter that Dr. Ulescu was a *sociologist* by trade, one whose slant of thinking was primarily influenced by behavioral psychology and thus one who looked at Thorka's "holistic concept of culture study" with more than a little contempt. Very small matter, that! The main thing was that Dr. Ulescu wasn't scheduled to teach a class at the hour of need. Which subsequently turned into *two* hours of need, since the call was repeated when young Mitran's students began stamping their feet in the auditorium to gain a modicum of attention.

Damn!

Both hours fell due again tomorrow, and now the chancellor was on his back to swill a cocktail or two in the midst of social chitchat with *the* ambassador (ours? somebody else's? to or from where?), who,

regardless of place of origin, would no doubt be accompanied by his obese wife, whose comment upon everything would be "*Very* interesting" or, when she was totally in the dark about the subject, its variant, "*Really* very interesting, don't *you* agree?"

Damn and double-damn!

Ah, the up-country farm. Yes—

His head jerked up at the sound of the office door opening. His scowl—an automatic response to the uninvited—turned swiftly into his most pleasant smile.

"May I be of some service?" he asked, rising.

The striking woman with the long-flowing red hair returned his smile.

"I would like to locate Dr. Alexandru Thorka."

"I share your desire, madam," Ulescu replied. "I've not seen him for some eight or nine days."

"But does he not work here at the University?"

She was beautiful, this woman!

"He is—well, as he puts it—rather loosely attached to our institution of learning. So loosely, in fact, he just picked up and left, if appearances mean anything."

She considered his response. "Then that is why I've not been able to locate him. I have looked just about everywhere. Tell me—you could perhaps find out just where it is he has gone?"

"Perhaps," he answered, then he looked at his wristwatch. "I wonder. There's a rather small intimate gathering honoring the ambassador this evening, which I must attend, in fact must depart for right away if I don't want to be late. I wonder if you would consider accompanying me. We could talk

about old Thorka on the way, not that I really care where he's gotten himself off to—although I am grateful, since it's brought me into contact with such a charming person as yourself.”

“I am flattered,” the woman responded softly, “but it really is Dr. Thorka I am interested in.”

“You—and the University administration,” Ulescu added. “Although I must say I don't know where he is, and I really don't care all that much about it.”

Her face seemed to harden. “But you could find out—if you chose to.”

He sighed. “I suppose I *could*, but according to my watch, I've got to be going. I'm sorry if—”

“Yes,” she said. “The young Gheorghe believed you could.”

“Gheorghe? Gheorghe Mitran? You've seen—”

“Your telephone,” was the quiet answer. “I think you should begin using it—now.”

The watch on Petre Ulescu's wrist now said that the time was ten minutes before nine, but he did not look concerned about the hour. He did not look concerned about anything. His vacant eyes stared at the telephone he had just replaced upon its cradle, then they moved to focus upon the red-haired woman, awaiting her next command.

She, on her part, spoke to him as if he could understand her. Perhaps he did, but only a fraction of the message, for it was only a fraction of his mental capacity that she had left him. Nonetheless, she spoke and he listened.

“It was worth my waiting for you, Petre Ulescu.

You were so busy, always so surrounded by others that I could not get to you alone. The wait was very worthwhile. Your connections with those of power are excellent. Were it not for my primary goal, I would use you to climb higher into the society of this nation. But that cannot be, not yet. You have given me much, Petre . . .”

Much indeed, she thought to herself. The latent images of those foreign friends of Thorka. Americans, they were—from a country called the United States, in what now was foolishly called the *New World*. But where in the United States—precisely where were the two men from? She had no doubt that it would be in that location that she might find the one she wanted, but Ulescu did not have the proper information.

Ulescu. Yes, she could use him to gain power in this country, this Romania, but—

No, she had vowed to be more careful this time. She must not tip her hand, not let *him* know she walked the earth again. Not until she had him within the web of her power and he could no longer be a threat to her. Thus she probably would shortly be visiting this America, which also was called the United States. And it seemed that only Thorka could tell her just where she had to go. With the sources Ulescu already had tapped among Romanian officialdom, she at least knew where she could find the man who would be her first step toward the destruction of her enemy. More than that, Ulescu might be useful in another way.

“Petre Ulescu,” she whispered. “Your connections are good enough to assist me. We must pack

your travel things. Ah, I know. Deep within you are feelings of responsibility, but then you also have the yearning to shirk those very same chores. I know. I know everything about you, Petre. So we shall escape this place together. Unfortunately, not to the farm your spirit would fly to, but to another place, a place far from here, a place into which your acquaintances can, in this complicated world of documents and examinations, gain entry for us with a minimum of difficulty—just as they did for your friend Thorka.”

She laughed. “Petre, Petre—do not look so downcast. In the old days, at least, the Rhine always was beautiful this time of year.”

Flora and Fauna: Very much like those of New York State.

Cam Sanchez closed the airline’s *Introduction to Germany* booklet with a frown. As an introduction to another country it was loaded with information that was next to useless, to him at least. What a revelation to learn that the language most inhabitants of Germany spoke was German! But—and this was very important—Americans would have little difficulty making themselves understood if they were careful to first determine whether or not the citizen to whom they were speaking understood English! How could any first-time visitor go wrong, armed with insight like that? As for the flora and fauna, a Californian might have a bit of trouble with the booklet’s explanation, but it was right up a New Yorker’s alley. Providing the New Yorker had been exposed to the flora and fauna the booklet had in mind. As an almost lifelong resident of Spanish Har-

lem, Cam's idea of flora was the putrid green mold that now and then grew in the darkest places of tenement basements. As for fauna, he recalled perfectly the sharp-toothed rats that subsisted on the putrid green mold and other flora-type delicacies.

He slipped the booklet into the pocket of the seat in front of him, nestling it between the brochure that gave him all the details on how best to enjoy traveling in a 747 Jumbo and the card that told him more than he wanted to know of the various escape routes from the plane in the event of an emergency. Escape routes!

He toyed with one of the long cheroots that were his own personal security blanket when he found himself in any kind of aircraft. Lighting it, he reflected that he'd already consumed two of the things in the hour they'd been airborne. Normally, Cam Sanchez did not smoke, but to him being on board an airplane wasn't a normal thing. The fact of being so far from solid ground was bad enough in itself, but the airlines always made sure that he got the message all the way to the pit of his stomach, making extraspecially certain he couldn't enjoy the best of the free food and beverage service that came with the first-class ticket he held.

For instance, those cute little stewardesses with their oxygen masks and inflatable lifesavers and their clever little introduction: "In the unlikely event that . . ."

And those cards with the escape routes clearly marked. Escape routes. At thirty thousand feet, they're talking about escape routes!

He inhaled deeply on the cigar and coughed. Terrible taste and terrible smell.

A fat banker type across the aisle evidently agreed. He coughed too, choking off the surrounding air with the Y formed by the spread thumb and fingers of his left hand. Cam grinned maliciously, then turned to look at Ktara sitting behind him. She merely smiled, although he knew she had little love for Cam's habit. The professor, too, would no doubt be registering some type of complaint, had he been awake. But he was not awake. In the seat next to Cam, Harmon dozed, the open *Runes of Ktara* face down on his lap. As he said he would, the older man had been spending almost all of his spare time studying that volume. Cam looked at it skeptically.

Why not?

He took the book carefully from Harmon's lap. His eyes fell on the pages to which the book had been open, close to the volume's beginning. One passage had been marked lightly in pencil:

*And then again one night she came
Her quest the same, but Lilith her name.
Her followers many, her powers great;
Lord Aidom her pawn, by law her mate.
"Rulers of the world are we!"
She cried to Aidom who could but agree,
Until the night of death began
And their army crushed to final man
And he—my Master—sealed her doom
And he—Lord Aidom—begged for boon.
"I grant but one," my Master said.
"The woman, she remains as dead."*

*But you, I leave you with your life,
To seek and find a better wife.
Rule well, Aidom, rule warily, wise;
Else you beg me again with your final cries."*

There was some very light writing in pencil in the margin of the page. Cam recognized Harmon's taut hand. There were two words, one of them preceded by a symbol. The symbol and the first word appeared next to the last mention of Lord Aidom:

= *Adam*, the professor had written.

The second word also might have had an equal sign before it, but it stood alone, directly opposite the reference to "a better wife."

Eve.

Looking at the page even more closely, Cam noticed that originally there had been question marks after the penciled additions, but they had been erased carefully. Harmon obviously had first wondered about his interpretation. He no longer wondered.

Lilith? Adam and Eve?

Cam grinned as he put out the cigar against the edge of the seat-rest ashtray. He knew just enough of Bible tradition to recognize the first name as well as the other two names that were known by people who had never cracked open the Old Testament. Supposedly, Lilith was the first wife of Adam, Eve being the second. His old grandmother had told him the story of how Lilith had displeased God so mightily that he threw her away from the Garden, then created Eve to be Adam's mate. Years later he was told by a friend studying for the priesthood that the whole

Lilith story was nothing more than the attempt of early holy men to reconcile the two different accounts of the creation of woman given in the Book of Genesis, the first chapter stating that man and woman were created simultaneously out of the earth and the second chapter stating that Adam was alone at first and then, from his rib, Eve was fashioned. At the time Cam accepted the friend's explanation as being plausible. In the meantime, he knew enough about the inventions of holy men and philosophers not to quarrel with his first assessment. Yet, it was obvious that the professor had a different idea, one based on a theory he'd voiced several times:

"Myths, Cameron, are little more than the inventions of primitive minds—and by primitive I do not necessarily mean unsophisticated—to explain things that cannot be disputed. Lightning, for example, cannot be disputed. It happens. But to us, it is rather simply explained in terms that we do not find uncomfortable—because of our levels of understanding of what we call *natural* causes. Yet, to earlier men, those who thought in anthropomorphic terms, lightning was the weapon of Zeus or Jupiter or Thor."

Thus, according to the professor's logic, Adam—or Aidom—really existed, was in fact a great king somewhere, and his two wives were real as well. Cam could mentally picture his employer reasoning it out:

Fact one: A king or Lord, as he was called, would naturally be called the "first man" within the territory over which he reigned.

Fact two: Adam is the "first man" in Scripture.

Conclusion: Simple enough. The storytellers' original version of the tale was corrupted over the years,

and the Genesis version was the one that was current when the story was finally put into written form.

All very logical, if . . .

One, you had interpreted Ktara's *Runes* correctly, and

Two, you believed what you read in that little book.

"Anything to drink, sir?"

The stewardess hovering over him smiled. A dazzling smile, one that probably had her in hock for life to her favorite dentist.

"Rum?" he asked.

"Of course."

He sipped it. Very, very good. Watching the girl push her cart to those seated in front of him, he reflected that at least she didn't owe anybody for shaping that twitching bottom of hers. Then he laughed to himself. Hell. These days, who in blazes knew?

Who in blazes knew *anything* for sure?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Passing through Customs at Frankfurt the following morning was little different from passing through Customs anywhere—at least when one had a woman like Ktara present.

“And in the crate?” the inspector asked.

Americans will have little trouble conversing with those who speak English, Cam recalled.

“Merely some things I need,” Harmon replied.

“Some—things?” the inspector asked.

“Things,” Ktara replied. Her eyes changed color momentarily.

The inspector smiled. “Ah! *Things!* Well, then—have you anything else to declare?”

“Nothing,” the professor told him. Which took care of Customs.

He was waiting for them just outside the gate.

Although he smiled heartily and clasped hands with all three of them with his normal sturdiness,

Cam was aware that Alexandru Thorka was not himself. He was a very worried man.

Harmon, who must have noticed the same thing, kept to courtesies—or tried to:

“Alex! It’s good to see you, but there really was no need for you to come all this way to—”

“I had the need, Damien. Not out of any sense of hospitality, but merely to keep my sanity. I wanted to be sure you were on the plane your cable indicated. Also, I wanted to see if—”

He stopped, his eyes looking beyond the three of them to where two porters struggled with a long crate, pushing it along on a four-wheeled dolly.

The shift in attention was not missed by Harmon. “You were saying, Alex?”

Thorka smiled grimly. “I merely wanted to be sure you brought with you—er—everything you might need.”

Harmon nodded. “Meaning, of course, my equipment.”

“Of course,” the Romanian said.

Through a rental agency Cam had arranged for a Volkswagen minibus to be waiting for them. In less than fifteen minutes after they’d met Thorka, the vehicle was heading west, Cam in the driver’s seat, Ktara next to him, and behind them, Harmon and Thorka. In the very rear of the bus was their baggage, including the “equipment” crate.

Twice before, Cam had been met by the Romanian scholar at a European airport, but this time the event was totally different. The first two times, Thorka was on his own stamping grounds in Bucharest, displaying for his old American friend—although

modestly—his importance through a chauffeured official limousine. Also, those times Thorka had been the one doing his old friend the favor, which he was more than happy to do. This time, however . . .

The absence of the chauffeured car was only the start. Not only was Thorka also a foreigner in the land of their meeting, but he was the one in need of help. Also, he looked anything but happy. Probably his having had to ask for help in the first place was enough to bother this man, whom Cam had come to know as being proud of his independence and self-reliance, but there was more to it than just that. He was more than simply unhappy. The man was frightened.

Now and then, during the lull in the talk, the Romanian would turn his head back to look at the long crate. Cam was well aware that the old man really couldn't be sure what was inside. Cam also was well aware that the old man had a fairly good idea. His knowledge of Dracula Mountain and its legends was superior to any man living except for Harmon and Cam—and the vampire himself. Yet, legends were legends, and even though Alexandru Thorka had argued throughout his active years as an academician that archaeologists and historians might have a better accuracy record if they would pay closer attention to the details of the supposed fables, he himself could not be certain, and that was the way Harmon intended to keep things.

Still, as the Volkswagen swung northward to parallel the Rhine, there was no reason for the professor not to utilize the Romanian's knowledge, especially since it was to his old friend's benefit.

"The woman with the red hair, Alex—have you any idea as to her identity?"

"I—I do not know. Not for certain, that is."

"For *uncertain*, then."

Thorka hesitated. He seemed to want to respond, but to consider the response he had in mind somehow too bizarre to be put into spoken words. Turning in her seat, Ktara caught Harmon's eye. She said nothing. She merely nodded her head, but that was enough.

Harmon rubbed his jaw reflectively. "Would the name *Elizabeth* mean anything in this connection?"

Thorka's mouth opened as if he had been slapped. Quickly regaining a measure of composure, he sighed.

"There is a story of an Elizabeth. Elizabeth *Bathory*, but . . ."

He still seemed unwilling to go on. Harmon prodded him further.

"A beautiful woman?"

"Yes. Or so it is said."

"With red hair."

"Hair like the flames of the setting sun. Or, again, that is what is said of the woman. She was—" He stopped, shaking his head.

"Go on, Alex. I'm very interested in this Elizabeth Bathory."

"Well . . . well, why not?" Thorka managed a weak smile. "At the very least, the telling will consume some of our travel time."

"Unless, of course, there is something more important that you should be telling us—something more germane to your present difficulty." Harmon

looked at his old friend closely. "Alex, I happen to suspect that there is nothing more important in the present context. I therefore suggest you get into it—as the most appropriate way of consuming the travel time you mentioned. It's all right, Alex. As you should know, I am rather intimate with things fantastic."

Thorka's face again took on a weak smile. "Fantastic. Yes, that is an excellent word for you to choose. But, for the moment, let us merely speak of what history says about a certain Elizabeth Bathory, whose name in legend has come down to us as the Blood Countess."

He inhaled deeply, as if making ready to tell the entire tale with one exhalation of breath, the look in his eyes revealing that such a goal was in and of itself unrealistic.

"Elizabeth Bathory, born to an aristocratic Hungarian family, with blood ties to King Steven of Poland. Married at a young age to Count Ferencz Nadasdy, who died in the year 1600. Accused of a number of foul and nefarious deeds, she was tried in 1610 for murder, but strangely not convicted—at least not officially. Nonetheless, Mathias II who then was King of Hungary demanded her death, and a compromise seems to have been worked out. She was taken to her tower bedroom and left there, all the windows and doors to and from the room walled up with bricks—except for a small aperture through which food and drink could be passed. The solitary confinement lasted for four years, at which point she died. The body, according to one version of the story, was

left where it was, the final small aperture being sealed."

Harmon nodded. "And according to other versions of the story?"

Thorka counted them off on the fingers of his left hand.

"One, irate villagers stormed the castle and burnt her body. Two, the body really never was found, but, instead, one day during that fourth year the tray of food that had been inserted for her had not been returned as was the usual, and upon investigation, the guards discovered her missing. Three, on the night prior to her body disappearing, a strange nobleman dressed in black put a sorcerer's spell upon the guards, who awoke to their frightening discovery. But none of these three stories have the historian's approval. It seems that an official death certificate was issued."

Harmon considered. "Possibly by an official who, even though he had no corpse to certify, feared the results that might come following a charge of irresponsibility?"

"That always is possible, but the rigorous historian allows for no such possibilities."

"You mentioned her crimes."

"Yes. Vampirism was one with which she was charged, albeit a strange kind of vampirism. She did not *drink* the blood of her victims, it seemed. No one claimed she had. It was more a matter of her bleeding the hapless people who came into her web by slitting their throats with a sharp knife—or some more ingenious implement. Or so the story goes."

“Alex—according to the story or stories, for what purpose did Elizabeth Bathory kill?”

The Romanian shrugged. “For eternal youth, it is said. That is why the vampirism charge seemed to be appropriate. The *cause* of the charge, however, might well have been the fact that the woman never seemed to age—at least, not physically.”

“Never seemed to age,” Harmon repeated. “Which means that, if she did not die in the year 1614—”

“She still could be alive today,” Thorka completed.

It was what Harmon had wanted, where he deliberately had led his friend. “Do you believe that, Alex? Do you really believe that the red-haired woman who threatened you in Bucharest is the same Elizabeth Bathory? Do you?”

“I . . .”

“Answer my question!”

Thorka turned from the American and gazed out his window of the bus. He did not turn back as he answered. “Believe? You ask if I believe. But what has that to do with anything? What difference does it make what *I* believe? Just because the woman who confronted me had red hair—”

“In that case, I am mystified,” Harmon said quietly. “I am at a loss as to why you wrote to me for help. Really, Alex, perhaps it would be most wise of you to return to Bucharest and tell the police about your slaying your colleague. Obviously, a case of self-defense. You don’t have to mention the rest of the episode, if you don’t care—”

“*You say that to me, Damien?*”

The cry with which the question came almost caused Cam to collide with a Mercedes that was bent

upon passing them. In the rearview mirror he chanced a look at Thorka's face, which, white with rage, was again turned toward the professor.

Harmon, on his part, met rage with reserve:

"Alex, if what you surmise—what you *really* surmise—to be the truth is in fact correct, you and I have no time in which to spar. I want your honest and open opinion as to what you are facing. Otherwise, I—we—can be of absolutely no help to you. My first question: Do you think it is Elizabeth Bathory—or the same woman who used that name—whom you met on the University grounds?"

Thorka's face now began to redden. "Y-yes."

"Next: *Why?*"

"Why," the Romanian repeated. "Why. That is not a question that can be answered precisely. I *feel* it is so. Perhaps, because she asked for *him*."

His eyes flickered to the back of the bus. Harmon ignored the movement. "Him," he repeated.

Thorka smiled, it becoming obvious to him that his American friend was not about to reveal what they both knew—or what he on his part strongly suspected—was inside that crate. He smiled, and in the process, suddenly relaxed.

"Him. The Count of Castle Dracula. That is the *him* I believe the woman was seeking."

"Why is that?"

Harmon suddenly was aware that Ktara was looking at him. Her eyes were narrow.

"Professor, I do not think all this is necessary," she said softly.

"Thank you," Harmon replied. "I don't believe I

asked you for an opinion.” As her eyes smoldered, he turned again to Thorka. “*Why?*”

“That is not difficult to answer,” Thorka said. “First, she did mention Arefu. It seems to me that in the entire history of that village—from the Year One, if you wish—there has been but one personage dwelling in its vicinity whom one might refer to as *him* with such emphasis.”

“And second?”

“And second—that one variation of the official story of Elizabeth Bathory’s last night. You recall it, I’m sure. The man dressed in black, the man with magical powers. That man might well have been an ancestor of the Terror of Arefu. His name was Dracul. Interestingly enough, according to portraits I’ve seen of the man, he looks very much like his descendant. Almost as if—as if he were the same man.”

Harmon placed a flat palm on the shoulder of the other man. “Alex, in the past day, two people have said something I have known all along—but something I never until now truly appreciated. You are a brilliant man.”

Thorka tugged at his short beard. “I trust you’ll appreciate something further, Damien.”

“Namely?”

The Romanian smiled weakly.

“Namely that this brilliant friend of yours is frightened out of his wits.”

It was mid-afternoon when the minibus pulled in front of the inn where Thorka had arranged for them to stay. The Romanian went immediately to the desk to register the three newcomers. As Cam assist-

ed Harmon from the carseat to his wheelchair, they both noticed that Ktara looked uneasy, her eyes appearing to focus on the high hill that loomed over the little town and the castle perched on its crest.

"An interesting-looking structure," the professor commented. "Seems to have weathered the years quite well."

But the woman appeared not to hear him, her eyes now closing as she seemed to concentrate, turning her head slowly around so that she could, by whatever means, sense all there was to sense.

"The vibrations are not good," she said after a moment.

"She is here?" Harmon asked

"Here, yes. All around us, she is here. Her presence is very strong, as if very recently she stood where we are standing, as if at this very moment her mind is watching us—and smiling."

Ktara opened her eyes, which now carefully scanned the exterior of the two-story inn. "We must be very careful, Professor."

Harmon nodded. "I always try to be," he said.

"Trying may not be good enough," she replied. "This woman is unlike any other enemy you have faced. One slip on your part, and you will be lost."

Cam's jaw set. "That's not entirely new to us," he said. Noting that he was looking at the crate in the rear of the bus, Ktara did not comment further. She remained there looking again at the castle on the mountain as the two men went inside.

Their three rooms and Thorka's all were on the second floor. After assisting the professor up the stairs

to his room, Cam went back down to the desk to look for someone to help him with their baggage.

"Ah, *mein Herr*," the desk clerk said. He was a little thin man with a red nose. "The young woman with you appears very interested in castles. There are many fine ones in this district, interesting in themselves and interesting also because of the excellent views of the Rhine. Perhaps you and your party would like to arrange for a tour of them?"

Cam shook his head. "No, what I'd like to do is—"

"Ah! Of course. The gentleman in the wheelchair. But perhaps a boat trip up the river. There is a variety of excursions available, complete with meals either on board the vessel or at a typical Rhineland *Gasthaus* along the way. I have here some brochures—"

Cam grunted and took the folders from the man. "Thanks. What I'd really like, though, is someone to help me with—"

"Of course. You wish to exchange your dollars into *Marks*? It is unfortunate the way the American dollar is no longer worth as much as it once was, but I will make you as good an exchange rate as you can get at the bank. Now, how much do you wish to—"

"What I *wish*," Cam said. "What I wish is some help with our luggage. I have a large crate that is fairly heavy."

"Ah!" the little man said. "Of course." Then he frowned. "It is unfortunate that my own back is not strong or I would assist you myself. But I am sure that Ludwig will help you."

"And where can I find Ludwig?"

"Ah. That may be a problem. I have no idea where

he is. Probably, he is drinking beer somewhere, if I know the man at all, and I do. Yes, probably he is drinking beer. But when he comes back, I will send him to you at once. He has a very strong back, Ludwig has, so I will at once . . .”

Cam left the little man talking to himself and went outside. There was another, simpler way of getting the big crate upstairs. He could take it up by himself—with a little help. His back probably was just as strong if not stronger than that of the beer-drinking Ludwig, and he had handled the thing before. Ktara’s powers of mental lifting had been of material and necessary assistance, however.

But as he approached the minibus, he saw that she wasn’t going to be of all that much help. Not right now, anyway.

She sat in the front passenger seat, her green eyes open as tiny vertical slits and directed toward that same castle. At first Cam was tempted to tell her of the bargain tour he could arrange for her if she were that interested in the place, but he thought better of it. With her powers, she was well aware that he wanted her help with the crate, and she would help him in her own good time. Meanwhile . . .

Meanwhile, maybe strong-backed Ludwig had the right idea.

He went back inside the dining room. Thorka already was there, ordering some lunch for the four of them. “I took the liberty,” he said. “The *Wiener schnitzel* here is the only element of this entire experience that I can recommend to others. Aside from the beer, that is. Join me while we wait?”

Cam grinned, realizing that there was another ele-

ment that had helped the old Romanian regain some of his buoyancy. He was relieved that his friend from America was here, that the burden that had rested heavily upon his shoulders was now shared with other shoulders.

As they brought their liter-glasses of beer to a corner table, Cam happened to glance out the near window, which looked out onto the rear of the inn. "I'll be right back," he told Thorka. "I think I've found Ludwig—and he's got a strong-backed friend with him!"

Thorka looked curiously at Cam's retreating form, then turned his eyes to the window. Two men were wrestling clumsily with a very large wooden box, trying to lift it onto the back of an open truck. For a moment he thought it might be the same box that—

But no, this one, although as large, was more squarish.

He heard Cam's voice hail the two men, and then he saw the Puerto Rican giant come into view, just as the big crate crashed indelicately onto the metal floor of the truck.

Cam almost changed his mind about asking them for help when he saw how they handled things, but then he smiled sardonically. Maybe that was just what was needed. A bouncing, crashing handling of the master's crate might make Ktara a little more cooperative next time.

"Hey—I've got another one of those around front. Can you give me a hand? Hey! I'm talking to you!"

But neither of the two men seemed at all aware of the fact that they were being addressed. While they might not be expert crate handlers, they were doing

a very expert job of ignoring the foreigner. Naturally, as the airline guide folder had informed him, a good many of the inhabitants of Germany spoke German—but certainly they had the ability at least to *hear* English when it was spoken, *Ja?*

Nein, evidently. The two men were walking around to the cab of the truck, without so much as a look at Cam.

All right, when language fails, there was that old American adage: Money talks.

Quickening his pace to bring him around to the front of the man opening the door on the driver's side, Cam pulled out his wallet and fanned several green dollar bills before the eyes of the man.

Within less than a minute, Cam stood exasperated, hands on his hips, as the truck rolled off, the two men within it. Neither had bothered to even look at the money he'd extended. It was as if his dollars—and himself too—had not even been there!

"I know," he told Thorka back inside the dining room. "I know about the dollar having lost some of its value over here, but this is ridiculous!"

The Romanian chuckled. "You are the victim of too many of your countrymen coming to places like this and waving their thick billfolds majestically as if they were entitled to royal treatment. In all frankness, you did not appear much different from my vantage point here." A word from the blousy woman who was the dining room hostess sent the two of them to downing their beer and then out of the dining room, Cam to fetch Ktara—if she could be fetched—and Thorka to his own room to wash up.

"Lately, I have taken on what may be a serious fe-

tish regarding cleanliness," he said. "It is as if, since meeting that woman in Bucharest, I have somehow become tainted, unclean."

"Cleanliness is next to godlessness," Cam quoted. He had meant it lightly, but the Romanian did not take it that way.

"There may be truth in that. There may also be truth in a statement comprising the opposites of the two states of being."

Nonetheless, his intentions to the contrary, Thor-ka did not wash up immediately upon entering his room. Because, immediately upon entering his room, he saw that there was already someone there.

A man with wide, almost blank eyes. A man he recognized.

"*Petre!* How on earth . . ."

Ulescu supported himself with both hands gripping the top of the bureau of the far wall of the room. His face was white and . . . *withered* looking, it seemed to Thorka. His speech was halting, as if it took great effort to form the words or the thoughts behind them.

"Run from . . . here," he whispered. "Before she changes her mind . . . run!"

"Petre—"

"No. There is . . . no time. She no longer needs me." He gasped for air. "You—you were to be the one . . . But she saw . . . the other. The American. He—"

"*Petre!*"

Ulescu's grip gave way, and he fell forward. Although Thorka's strong hands caught him before he

could collide with the floor, it made little difference. Ulescu's eyes had rolled up into his head, his face that of a dead man.

It was as Thorka was gently easing the body of his colleague down to the carpet that the impact of the man's final words struck him.

"Good God!" he said under his breath. "If . . ."

But there was no *if* about it. Already out in the hall, the big Puerto Rican was rapping loudly on the professor's door, a concerned look beginning to cross his features as he tried the door handle. It was locked.

"*Break it in!*" Thorka urged, but Cam had needed no urging. His right boot was in powerful flight straight toward the lock, which with splintering inward crunch yielded without much resistance.

Inside the room, there was no sign of any struggle having taken place.

But, more to the point, there also was no sign of Damien Harmon.

CHAPTER EIGHT

As the three of them stood in Harmon's room, Ktara's voice had an edge like a knife.

"You see her power, Mr. Sanchez? Even now she is strong enough to effectively counter my abilities."

"*She* was the reason you were just sitting there?"

"I made an error of judgment. The tendrils I sent out to find her were just what she required. Grasping one of them, she sent it back, swiftly and forcefully. I was in a state of mental shock."

Thorka, too, looked as if he was in that state at the present time. The woman's words were something he should have been concentrating upon, but somehow he couldn't. "How? How did she manage to take him from here?"

"That crate," Cam said. "My two friends with the truck. Where they were is almost directly below this window." He turned to Ktara. "Am I right?"

She nodded.

"I can't figure, though," Cam said, "why the professor didn't put up any kind of fight. At the very least, there's that .38 clipped to the bottom of his chair."

Ktara closed her eyes for an instant. "He was not suspicious when they knocked at the door. He thought it was one of us. Before he had a chance to react—"

"Terrible!" Thorka broke in. "This is terrible, and it is all my fault. This is the worst thing that could have happened."

"No, not the worst, Dr. Thorka," the woman said softly. "She has her limitations. You can thank whatever spirits you pray to for that. Also, she too has made a serious error of judgment. She struck too soon and struck incorrectly."

"I don't follow," Cam said.

"If she had waited, just for a few minutes, to attack me, what would I have been doing? I most likely would have been helping you remove our—equipment from the rear of our motor vehicle, yes? Once that was outside—once it was *any place* other than inside that bus—she would have known its precise location."

Cam's brows furrowed. "You mean she doesn't know now?"

"She may suspect, but she cannot know for sure. The bus, Mr. Sanchez, is constructed of steel, through which her thoughts—just as mine—cannot penetrate. That is why, when I realized her mind was bombarding mine, I got in the bus myself."

"Now I've got it!" Cam said. "She's got the professor, but she won't be able to—"

"No," Ktara said. "His mind is safe—for the time being. But—"

"Where?" Thorka insisted.

She looked out the window. "That castle. That is where she prepares her reception."

The Romanian shook his head. "But that cannot be! It is a tourist place. Almost every day people drive up to see its interior and the view from its battlements. There is a full-time staff working there."

Ktara smiled grimly. "Your last statement is quite accurate, Doctor. Except you did not add that the full-time staff now serves Sabor."

Thorka repeated the name. "I've not heard it before."

The woman looked at him with level eyes. "It is unfortunate that you had to hear it at all, Doctor."

Her eyes flashed out two white lightninglike bolts. Cam caught the man as he sagged downward.

"It is merely a trance—for his own protection," Ktara said to Cam. "Take him to his room and lock the door from the outside. There are other things we now must do."

Cam's eyes went to the window and the castle on the hill beyond it.

Ktara's eyes narrowed. "A problem, Mr. Sanchez. You and I alone cannot hope to destroy her. Yet we cannot wait for the long hours of late afternoon to pass before attempting to do something."

"I got the message. You said earlier that the professor's mind was safe for the present, then you added a *but*."

"She could *kill him*, Mr. Sanchez. No magic, no oc-

cult methodology, nothing of that sort would be needed. All she would have to do is to kill your employer. Though she knows it not, in that one simple act she would have her revenge upon my master. And she would have the world at her feet.”

Consciousness came to Damien Harmon in one rushing burst, just as had the unconscious state that had preceded. For an instant, he thought he still was in his room at the inn, telling Cam to come on in and finding, when the door swung open, not Cam but two strangers, one of whom wore a large antique ring that he shoved close to Harmon’s face. There had been a small *hissing* sound, and the thought had begun in the professor’s mind that it was some kind of gas. That thought completed itself now, and even though he could not immediately see either of the two big men, he reacted to defend himself.

His left hand shot up to protect his face, his right went under the seat of his wheelchair.

The gun no longer was there. And it was now he realized that neither was the inn—not in terms of his present location.

The room was some kind of sitting room, complete with a selection of seventeenth-century furnishings that included a magnificent crystal chandelier that dangled from the center of the high ceiling. Next to the window at the far end of the room, a suit of shiny steel armor stood guard, its helmet visor down in battle-ready position, its heavy battle lance an upright extension of its mailed fist. But it was the window itself that drew the professor’s immediate attention. Not its shape, so much, or the bright afternoon

light that streamed in through the opening. No, it was the scene that lay beyond that opening. With the sparkling waters of the Rhine that far below, he knew he had to be very high up on some hill. Which meant that he was some distance from the inn. Briefly, he wondered about the others, if they had been taken, too, and if so where they might be. There was only one way to find out.

Quietly, his hands on the wheels of the chair moved him toward the thick door that was the only entrance-exit to the room. As he did so, he wondered if he were being stupid. Perhaps he might best stay right where he was and wait. Wherever he was, there wasn't much he could do by himself. He stopped his forward movement and again looked through the window out into the daylight. His primary weapon—the one that he last saw in the rear of the Volkswagen bus—could not yet be employed. But there was at least one thing he could do now, a thing that he might not have a chance to do if, at the wrong time, somebody decided to shove another golden ring under his nose.

His eyes closed briefly. The invisible finger of energy touched the lever of the device implanted under his rib cage. When night came, his weapon of destruction would be activated.

Weapon. In the intervening hours, Harmon himself might need one. But what? His pistol was gone, and there appeared to be nothing much within this room that might serve as . . .

Except, of course, the battle lance gripped by the stalwart suit of armor.

Harmon smiled to himself as the picture came into

his mind. Sir Damien Harmon, astride his wheeled metal steed, his deadly battle lance aimed at his opponent, and shouting his attack cry as he rolled powerfully to the charge!

Nonetheless . . .

He had no idea of what he might find on the other side of that thick door. A sharp-tipped weapon, especially one with a long shaft between himself and whoever might . . .

And the thing could be thrown, too, as one might throw a javelin. The lance looked heavy, but the professor's shoulders and arms were well developed. He could handle it, maybe, if he could manage to get the thing free from the rest of the armor. But that didn't look as if it was going to be easy.

It wasn't.

Moving his chair so that the metal fist surrounding the shaft of the lance was directly before his face, Harmon's fingers gripped those of the armor and tested their lock. It was firm. Relaxing for a brief moment, he marshaled the full power of his body, beginning from its source in the center of his being just below the solar plexus and sending the energy pulsating upward through his shoulders and arms down to the wrists and fingers. Now.

Again the steel fingers held firm. His own power wasn't going to be enough.

Not unless . . .

Not unless he added an additional source of power, the same source that he had used earlier to activate that *other* weapon.

He had begun experimenting with telekinesis—the power of moving objects through mental means

—a long time ago. He then thought of it as a way in which he might himself repair the structural damage to his spinal column, damage that the best medical minds then as well as now could not repair through normal operational methods. Through much study, through trial and error, he had mastered the power—but only a small part of what, through much more work, he felt he could gain. To lift a cigarette lighter from a table top and to carry it three feet before it dropped from control both was and was not a major feat, depending upon one's point of view—and one's objective. But even that level of skill had given him the power to control the legendary Son of the Dragon, the vampire Count of Transylvania. Perhaps, here and now, it also might serve him to gain control over a much more mundane means of killing.

Again he built up the physical power from its source in his midsection, but now, as he felt it surge through his upper body, he closed his eyes and relaxed his mind so that the colors of the spectrum contained in it ceased their motion and began to lose their very coloration. From the center, from somewhere, a pinpoint of pure black appeared, a small hole in the fabric of the mind, a tiny aperture that now—now—began to enlarge. Slowly but surely, it grew—a void taking into itself all of the brightness and lesser darkness surrounding it, an abyss that consumed everything, and from everything fashioned . . .

At the very heart of the black void, it began—a kernel of white energy. This was the source of telekinetic power, perhaps the source of much more than that as well. If it could be handled, if it could be har-

nessed—if it could now, right now, be joined with the effort of Harmon's massive shoulders and arms—
Now.

Now!

The armor moved. In a brushing of steel against steel, the hand of the thing moved! Harmon opened his eyes.

And was aghast at what he saw.

For the hand that had moved was *not* the one holding the great lance. It was the *other hand*—a mailed fist that raised up as if to deal a deadly crushing blow to the skull of the man who sat helplessly beneath it, the man whose physical and mental powers had been spent to no effect. But even as Harmon readied his arms to try to deflect the blow, he saw it wasn't going to come. No, the hand kept rising—directly to the grilled visor that was the front of the steel headgear.

The visor lifted.

Harmon's jaws clenched tightly together. The face inside the helmet . . .

It was as the face of a dead man, one recently dead, whose body had been worked upon by a mortician—a facial cosmetician who did not get things exactly right, who had allowed the features to be too plastic, who had missed the expression of “peaceful rest” and had instead merely presented a face of “a dead man.” The eyes—they were open, and, although they seemed focused upon the man in the wheelchair before them, they seemed to be looking through, rather than at, that toward which they were directed.

All this Harmon saw in an instant. He had little

time to react, let alone time in which to *think* of how he should react.

For immediately following the lifting of the visor, the thick wooden door crashed open.

Four long lances were leveled at the professor, each held by fully armored blank-eyed knights of the realm. As they entered, they moved two to a side to allow someone else passage into the room.

"I am Sabor," the woman said.

He had heard this woman described as beautiful, and he could not but agree. At the same time, she was living proof of that old statement about there being many kinds of beauty. Even in the sense of *female* beauty there were different—and quite separate—classes. Harmon, for example, had always regarded his young niece Jennifer as being the zenith of her type of beauty—which could be called the freshly scrubbed blonde-haired all-American healthy-mind-in-healthy-body type. Then there was Ktara, who exemplified the beauty associated with animal grace, which combined the intelligence of the Dark and the Primal. Now there was this woman . . .

Fire. That was the word that seemed to sum up the impression she made upon the man in the wheelchair. Her long red hair was part of it, as was the bright red satin toga that she wore Roman-style as if she were reigning as an empress of the Seven Hills and the known world beyond them. But there was more than just the redness that suggested the flames of Hell.

Her face was strongly angular, so that the eyebrows and the turn of the nose and mouth and her

high cheekbones all gave her the effect of sharp flames. And the eyes themselves—*smoldering* was an apt description. Smoldering in such a way that no man could miss their inherent sexuality. A demon, a succubus, from the depths of the fiery underworld itself.

Sabor.

She smiled at him, the brief smile a queen would give to a servant, a smile that merely recognized his existence for the moment.

“You did not seem overly amused by the nature of the guard left with you,” she said, her voice one of quiet observation. But there was a touch of impatience about it as well.

“Perhaps,” Harmon suggested, “perhaps I am not easily amused.”

“Or perhaps creatures of the dead are repulsive to you.”

“Perhaps.”

The smile widened. “Then you should know that these”—she gestured to the five guards, all of whom stood rigidly awaiting her command—“are not dead men. They are very much alive, and they will remain so as long as I retain control over them. There are many like them in this place, Professor, tourists and their guides and those others who have come to investigate those who were previously missing from below the mountain. Very helpfully, they have come to me, to serve me as one of my station should be served. In any event, these beings should not repulse you—not you who have revived one who is even more repulsive than they!”

Harmon looked at the five blank-faced men.

"At least the one of whom you speak is his own master and not a slave," he said quietly.

The woman's nostrils flared. "Not a slave? You mean not a slave *yet!* He shall know slavery of the meanest kind. He shall know mastery, my mastery, over him. For a time he shall know these things, before I destroy him!"

"There have been previous encounters," Harmon said.

She laughed. "Which he has won. Yes, I freely admit it. And why should I not admit it? This time all will be different. This time I have planned well, Professor Harmon. You no doubt realize that you are part of my plan."

The realization came to Harmon like a sharp slap. If this woman—she had merely to have him killed! If she did that, the game was ended with her being the winner. The world . . .

"Your face, Professor. It has a strange look about it. Are you afraid of death?"

He answered cautiously. "I am human enough to fear death, yes."

"But—but *death* you would have feared from the moment you understood that you were my captive. No. It is something other than death you fear. I would like to know what that is. You will tell me."

I will tell her. Harmon reflected that he no doubt would. Not through choice, but after she had his thoughts, one by one—or perhaps in a quick rush, an instantaneous *whoosh* of some erasing wind—she would know all there was to know. He exhaled the breath he found his lungs contained. There was no way out of this one, none at least that he could see.

He laughed.

"Now you are amused?"

"Why not? Life itself—even a life as long as yours has been—is an amusement. My own, for example. I brought something into the world, something without which the world deemed itself better, and now my life ends—not caused by that thing itself, but by its enemy, who is an abomination far worse than—"

"I do not like your thoughts, Professor!"

He nodded. "Then leave them to myself."

She paused. "You are a clever man, Professor Harmon. Of course, I knew that before meeting you. For one who is physically infirm as yourself to have dared to free the Dark One says much about you. But a fool could have dared. You did much more, you succeeded with your dare. In the past, there has not been one instance in which the person or persons who revived him remained alive past the instant it took him to take his first awakening blood-meal. I am interested in the why of that. What bond is there between yourself and the one you call Dracula?"

The bond of life and death, he said to himself. To the woman, he merely shook his head. "I suppose he appreciated my knowledge."

Her laugh was sharp. "Knowledge? Yours? There is no knowledge upon this planet that he had not mastered in ancient days. One time, a very long time ago, if he and I had joined as I wanted, we could have—"

She stopped and looked into Harmon's eyes. "I could have all of your thoughts in an instant. I believe you know that."

"I know it. Still, that doesn't give me the ability to

tell what I don't know."

"You're lying."

Very carefully he considered his reply. He was a part of her plan, she'd told him. That meant she wanted him alive. It might mean that she wanted him with all his abilities intact; then again it might not. He broke the connection between their eyes and then reestablished it. The move was obviously deliberate, as were his words:

"I'm an old man. You want my thoughts? Take them the easy way."

She seemed to consider the suggestion. "There are places below—in the dungeon—where all kinds of exquisite tortures could be applied. You would talk, you would tell me all I wanted to know, I think."

"Not before the inevitable heart attack," he responded. A cold shiver went up his spine. He was pushing hard. *Too* hard? But what other card did he have? None. She had all the aces, and he didn't even have a measly deuce with which to play. So the name of the game was Bluff, a game he never liked to play at all. Because, if the bluff were called . . .

"All right, Professor, we'll have it your way!"

Her eyes flashed red.

"*Who are you?*" she screamed.

She stepped two paces backward from the man in the wheelchair, the ends of her fingers rising swiftly to lightly touch her temples. Her face paled as her eyes again flashed with bright redness.

"*How . . .*"

For the second time, Harmon heard it. The sound mixture that was at one and the same time the soft

tingle of a bell and the crash of two deafening cymbals. Then he began to understand. Two tries. Two failures. It had to be the plate that cupped his brain—there was no other explanation. Even if there was, that would suffice for now. This was hardly the time to figure out exactly why he was safe. It was the time to say thank you to whatever it was that caused it.

“What are you?”

“Your captive, for one thing,” he answered levelly.

It was the correct response. Somehow, he’d said precisely the right thing to allow her to regain a sense of command and composure. As if in appreciation for his gift, she smiled down upon him.

“That is correct, Professor. I admit to being slightly curious as to how your mind withstands my penetration, but I can wait. You see, I do not rely only upon yourself. The information I require may well be in the minds of others. That strong giant who serves you, for example. Or that she-bitch I have hated for centuries. They know where I am and where you are, both of them. Even now, they approach—accepting the trap that I have baited. That, you see, is your function, Professor. You are the bait, not only for the two who come now—much too early, but I shall find a way to delay them until the proper time—but also for *him!*”

Harmon looked to the daylight streaming through the window. “He cannot come now. You must know that.”

“But he will come. He will!”

Harmon nodded. Yes, he will. For the mental finger already has touched the unit within his breast,

and the splinter has been removed from the heart of him who lays upon the coffin of earth. He will be coming.

Unless, in the meantime, Damien Harmon died.

CHAPTER NINE

"It begins now," Ktara said.

Cam withdrew the .357 Magnum from within his jacket. The heavy butt of the weapon felt good in his palm. At the very least, the weapon and what it could do if used properly were something he understood. Killing—by gun or knife or bare hand or foot—he understood. But killing by other methods, in ways that were beyond his comprehension, was unnatural, somehow wrong. The count killed his enemies by drinking their blood. After a fashion, Cam had become familiar with that, although the very fact of its having become familiar had an unsettling effect deep in his gut. Then, too, he had seen—*seen*—voodooists hurt and maim with nothing more than a clay doll. But this, this woman who called herself Sabor, was beyond his comprehension. He admitted it, and he admitted that anything beyond his comprehension was something to avoid.

"But Professor Harmon is up there," Ktara now said.

He scowled at the reminder that his thoughts were never his own. "I know where he is. That's why I'm here." He looked up the incline of the dirt road they followed. They had taken the small Fiat that Thorka had rented in the village below, at Ktara's insistence leaving the minibus where it was. Then they had left the car and taken the road upward on foot. Cam had argued both points.

"Why not take the bus? We'll want *him* nearby, won't we?"

"He'll be nearby, when it is time for him to be."

Then: "Why leave the car now? There's nobody in sight."

"But we are in somebody else's sight. The car—that would make it too easy for her. She has minions now, many of them."

Minions, Cam had thought as they left the car. Right. That's exactly how he felt. And she, of course, had realized it.

"Mr. Sanchez. For the present we are allies. Please understand that. I do not wish Professor Harmon to be harmed any more than you do."

He had smiled at her. "To you it would be little more than an inconvenience."

"Perhaps that is so. If my master should die, I would again begin to age. I would perhaps hold out until I became what you imagine to be the old crone who first came to you months ago, and then the nature of my bond between my master and myself would force me to find another who might restore him to life. Perhaps that is the totality of my reason

to save the life of your employer. But I would have suspected that you too might have a valid reason for valuing the life of the man."

Cam's face reddened. "Damn you, you know full well—"

"Yes," she cut him off. "So there is little reason for us to discuss it, especially since the time for discussion has ended and the time for other things begins. Right now," she said. "It begins now."

A line of men, maybe twenty or thirty of them, suddenly confronted them, blocking their way upward. They looked strange. Their dress was something from a page of Dark Ages history. Their weapons were from the same period. Lances, swords, and shields. They wore no armor, but did not seem to fear the large revolver that Cam had brandished. They seemed to fear nothing at all—*feel* nothing at all.

One of them, the closest, who had appeared from behind a clump of bushes to Cam's right, lifted his long sword high above his head. He was at least ten yards from where Cam and Ktara stood, but his scream was unmistakably a kill-cry.

He—and the rest of them—charged.

Cam grinned as the first slug from his Magnum slammed its way through the right eye of the leader and slapped him to the ground without subsequent movement of trunk or limb. Lifting only perceptibly, the weapon exploded a second time, and a second man went down, not as gracefully as the first, his arms flailing upward and his body turning to the left in mid-air—but just as effectively dead. A third time

the gun barked, but this time there was a marked difference in the end result.

The man kept coming. Cam was certain he'd sent a slug through the man's chest—but he kept coming, *as if nothing at all had touched him.*

"Specters," Ktara said. "They can't harm you physically, and you can't harm them."

"But the first two—"

"They were real enough. Sabor is very clever. She conserves her own forces, however many she has, by mixing them up with mental creations. Meanwhile, you waste ammunition on something harmless."

"And you—when do you start helping out?"

The question was not asked as desperately as it might have been. There were still at least twenty men—or twenty forms of men—coming at them. All were weaponed, and all were between five and fifteen yards from them—and closing fast.

"I can do nothing about the specters," she replied. "As for the others . . ."

Her eyes flashed brightly. Cam had seen the woman in action before. He knew she had the power to turn human beings into robots; he'd seen her do it. But this time nothing happened.

"As for the others?" he repeated.

She smiled. "They are completely under Sabor's control. Their minds are hers. The best I can do, Mr. Sanchez, is to show you which are the real opponents and which have been created for your mind only. Watch carefully."

Again the eyes of the dark woman flashed, and Cam watched. At first he saw nothing. Then it was as if a cloudy barrier had been placed between them

and those who rushed toward them. Something of the consistency of a light fog, or so it appeared. Its density must have been something more substantial, however.

With cries of men eager for battle, the twenty or more figures plunged on—until the first line of them came into contact with the misty barrier. There were four figures who did so. Two of them passed through as if they had encountered nothing at all. The other two reacted as if they'd run into a stone wall. They staggered backward a couple of paces, then again took up the attack.

“No—not them! The ones who could *not* pass through!” Ktara hissed. Cam's Magnum barrel had snapped up to zero in on the face of one of those who had come through the barrier and was now no more than thirty feet from where he stood, his lance leveled at Cam's gut.

“I can't stop the specters!” Ktara said. She said it impatiently, as if she expected Cam to have gotten the message the first time she'd explained it. Cam's jaws set together tightly. She probably was right, but what the hell—this was, after all, the first time he'd had to deal with ghosts. Excuse the expression. *Specters*.

His gun, however, didn't move.

Rather, he didn't want to move it. Specter or not, the form that was rushing him—and the other that had passed the barrier with him and was coming up fast behind his teammate . . .

Damn it, they looked real enough for Cam. As did those sharp lance ends that glistened all too brightly in the late afternoon sun!

“You’re sure . . .”

“They cannot harm us, Mr. Sanchez. Keep your attention on the barrier. When I lift it, all those on the other side are our real concerns—nothing or no one on *this* side.”

He nodded his understanding, even while he allowed his peripheral vision to take in the scene beyond the barrier. His main points of focus remained where they were, alternating between the two closest warriors whose screams still seemed to fill the air and who . . .

Screams?

Did a ghost or a specter make a sound? If what Ktara said was true, this woman Sabor had created something for his *mind* to see. A mental thing. But hearing was more than mental, wasn’t it? A matter of sound waves striking against the inner ear—a *physical* striking! On the other hand, couldn’t you say that seeing also was physical? Except that this might not be seeing, not with the *eye*, but rather . . .

“Please, Mr. Sanchez, take my word for it!”

His eyes snapped to Ktara. She was not looking at him, but kept her flashing gaze upon the foggy barrier she had fashioned. All right. She was, of course, right. He was no damned philosopher or metaphysician. He knew nothing about what it was they faced . . .

Faced.

The thing—human or not—*was directly before him!*

The heavy pistol snapped up automatically, as did Cam’s feet, which moved him into a forward leaning *pa kua* defensive position. The least little pressure

upon the thrust-out fingers of his empty left hand, and the right index finger would send lead in the right direction and fast. But there was no pressure. None. What there was . . .

A sort of wetness, a cold clamminess. Very chilling to the system, yet slight. And very temporary.

The thing had passed *through* him! And as Cam whipped his head around to see where it had gone, there was no telling.

Because, whatever it was, it had disappeared. *Completely gone!*

And the other one—the one that had headed for Ktara—was no longer in sight. Cam watched as one of the spectral beings passed between them. At the very instant the thing moved behind them, it vanished. Another went the same way, then still another, and Cam thought he understood. It was useless for Sabor to continue the charade once it no longer was a threat to her enemies. Once they had passed her enemies by—or touched them—their usefulness had ended. And therefore *they* ended.

A calculating bitch, this Sabor.

He now turned his attention to where all along Ktara had told him it should be. There were but seven of the warriors on the other side of the barrier. Each of them had collided heavily with what blocked them, and each had advanced to the spot that now stopped the further progress of his lance point or sword point. The mix was five swords, two lances. The total of seven was not overly fortuitous.

“No,” Cam said. “Don’t lift the barrier yet. Give me a chance to reload.”

"Hurry, then. I cannot hold this forever. My mental powers are also being used for other things."

From the big revolver he extracted the two useless shells and replaced them with live ammunition taken from the box that rested snugly in his jacket pocket.

"Say the word," he said.

"Now," she replied.

Lances and swords progressed through the space where the fog had been but no longer was. Swiftly the Magnum barked six times, sending six packages of quick death to six of those who advanced.

The one remaining carried his lance low.

"You could stop him," Cam told Ktara.

"I could, but you'd *rather be the one to do it.*"

It was not a question. He was long past the point of knowing that she did not have to ask. There was no doubt in her mind or his. She knew.

With a cry of his own to match that of the lance-bearing attacker, Cam sprang to meet him, pivoting swiftly to the right side of the long pointed weapon and then clamping both hands heavily downward along its shaft. The point had barely dug into the turf when Cam's left leg arced horizontally over the lance's shaft, the sole of his boot stopping its roundhouse flight with a bone-cracking crunch that sent the jaw of the lance bearer free from its hinge and a shard of jawbone into his lower throat. There was a violent coughing up of blood, which ended as a follow up of the same bootsole drove the man's nosebone deep into his brain.

"Don't look overly jubilant, Mr. Sanchez," the woman said. "You fight well, but this man had no mind to direct his fighting. Even if he had, his life

was lived in a nonviolent atmosphere. He was not a killer."

Cam's lips turned into a scowl. "He would have killed me."

"Correction. *She* would have killed you. Remember that, Mr. Sanchez. *She*. I would not have thought it necessary to lecture you, but—"

"Don't." It was almost a snarl. "Don't bother with the lecture, lady. Two reasons. Number one, having not lived all your years, I'm hardly bright enough to comprehend even the most essential points of your dissertation. Number two, my boss is up there on that hill, and I just don't have time to listen to you."

She looked at him, not unkindly. "Why do you dislike me, Mr. Sanchez?"

The question took him off guard. "I—I don't dislike you."

She smiled. "I know that. But thank you for saying so."

He took a step toward her, his conscious mind not even knowing what it was he was about to do. Her smile stayed where it was, but her right hand raised, palm forward, to stop him. "Number two, your boss is up there on that hill . . ."

He nodded. "Ktara, I—"

"Don't say anything more. Please don't. I know what your thoughts are, but they are out of place here. Perhaps they are out of place anywhere, any time, but here and now is not the place or time. There are other obstacles to our reaching your employer, the first of which your eyes should be able to discern from where you stand."

Cam nodded again, even while wondering how she

had read thoughts in his mind that had not yet formed. Or was that really the truth? A long time ago, this woman had told him that his sexuality, his—well, anything about him—meant nothing to her and never could. Subsequent to that, he had convinced himself that he hated her, hated her and her thousands of years of so-called wisdom and so-called experience and so-called slavery to the fiend who was her Dark Master, and yet . . .

He knew that, for all her ancient secrets and for all her superiority, he did not really hate this woman. A human emotion such as hate perhaps did not apply when dealing with one of her kind. In any event, she was right. His real thoughts, whatever they were, were quite out of place at the present. With an economy of motion, he reloaded the Magnum.

“How many of them are real?” he asked. “How many real ones and how many just specters?”

He was referring to the large gray wolves that now blocked their way.

“Amused, Professor?”

She stood behind his chair, looking past him and out the great open window of what appeared to be a music room of the old castle, looking downward upon the scene far below them both. She was close enough to him, close enough that, with a sudden movement, he just might be able to send her hurtling through space and down upon the rocks. It was that thought that had caused Harmon’s lips to curl into a half-smile—that thought and its dismissal. Any suddenness on his part would cause one of the four lance

points now trained upon him to put an end to his existence—an end that, aside from its meaning to him personally, he must avoid at all costs if he could.

“I asked you—”

“If I were amused. Perhaps I am. My friends seem to have made short work of your first line of defense. Perhaps you are not as invulnerable as you think.”

She did not react immediately. When she did, her voice was cold. “Your friends. The man-giant is perhaps a friend, but that other one—the Dark One’s minion—she is friend to no one, especially to one such as yourself. She used you, Professor, she used you for her own purposes. Perhaps you think it was the other way around, that it was you who used her, and perhaps there is some basis for your belief. But if so, it is only because she has chosen to allow you that belief. I have known her of old, and I know her to be a deceiver.”

“You hate strongly, Sabor.”

“I have much reason to hate her. You have no conception of the reasons.”

He answered quietly. “I have some conception. I know of her powers, and I know they have been used against you in the past—and I know they have proved too much for your machinations. Even as now, she continues to defeat you.”

She followed his eyes downward to where the wolves had begun to attack. “She has her powers, yes. But she is little more than a tool to the one who uses her, just as the young man is a tool for yourself. He is your legs, your muscles.”

“Effective legs and muscles,” Harmon said.

She smiled. “Yes. Watching him now, I profess to

a certain admiration of his physical skills. He might be of use to me later. He rather reminds me of someone."

Harmon turned his head casually. "Would that be the adventurer Ulysses? Or perhaps the Lord Aidom? Or—"

Her eyes flared. "You know much, Professor Harmon. When, after I destroy my foes, I drink your knowledge, I shall be pleased. And I shall have your mind, make no error there. My earlier attempt was blocked, but my powers will be full at nightfall. As for your younger associate, his mind, too, is protected for the present, but by a different kind of protection. *She* has surrounded him with a shield to keep me from him. In doing so, she plays into my own hands. I wish not his mind at this juncture, I wish not to overburden my facilities that await *his* coming. Thus for the present there is no threat to your man. But it is good that she expends her own energies in protecting him. The weaker the cat-slave becomes, the better."

She laughed. "Yes, our little Ktara will become very weak. Before this day is very long into the night, she will grovel before me. And then will I have my triumph over her, then will I have your young man to dally with for an hour's pleasure—or perhaps more, if I enjoy him. Otherwise, he will die horribly."

Harmon nodded. "Horribly, perhaps," he said. "But not all that easily. Mr. Cameron Sanchez—I suspect not unlike the noble Ulysses and the warrior Lord Aidom—will take a good deal of killing. I can assure you of that."

The big gray wolf's snarling lunge ended in a scream of agony as the flashing sword *thwacked* wetly into its rib cage. The Puerto Rican giant sidestepped the falling corpse, his arm and shoulder muscles retracting the huge weapon of steel and swiftly plunging it forward and through the breastbone of another furry attacker. The pack originally had numbered more than a dozen and a half, the half quickly biting the dust with Magnum slugs in their brains after Ktara had given him the word.

"No specters this time, Mr. Sanchez—they're all real flesh and blood."

Strangely, this pleased him. No, not so strangely. Even though he had nothing to fear from a spectral image of a four-footed killer, even though the odds would have been better for him for every one of the wolves whose fangs were nothing more than mist, the real flesh and blood of which Ktara spoke were elements he knew how to handle. Cut flesh, and it bleeds. Shoot it down, and it dies.

Six of them died swiftly. The seventh showed no evidence of planning to wait for Cam to reload his pistol, thus the weapon was shoved into his belt and replaced in his hands by a large two-hand sword, which its previous wielder, his skull crushed in, no longer needed. The blade flashed up and around and back and forward, and two more wolves joined their dead brothers. Which left ten to go.

By Cam's count, at least. He had reckoned without Ktara.

With a surprised yelp, the wolf that now was closest to them left the ground—not in a leap forward, but straight up, its paws dangling beneath it help-

lessly. Then it came crashing down, directly in the path of another of the pack, the collision sending the other sprawling. One of them, the one that dropped, lay still, in death. The other screamed as its legs thrashed in the attempt to regain a standing position. Cam's attention snapped away from the scene. The wolf wasn't going to make it, not with its back broken.

To your right!

The message bombarded his brain just in time. Pivoting to his right, he brought his sword up and downward in a circular arc that cleaved the attacking wolf's head down the middle in two almost perfectly equal sections. Blood splattered his forearms as he whirled to meet another, his horizontal sweep of the blade just a bit too low. Nonetheless, the power in his swing was enough to slice the two front legs of the beast completely clean from the blood-gushing stumps that remained. It was not quite enough to deflect the trajectory of the airborne hulk of flesh. Collision of animal against man sent both of them down, the foaming jaws of the wolf dangerously close to the temporarily unprotected throat of the man.

With a quick jerk of his body to the left, Cam rolled free, the animal attempting to follow, but collapsing to the earth, unsupported by the legs that no longer were there. As the man regained his feet, the gray wolf screamed out its rage and tried again to launch an attack.

The blade flashed downward, and the beast was out of its misery. Again the sword was pulled back in readiness, the man's eyes swiftly scanning the ter-

rain for the next target, his muscles alert to thrust or slash as required.

The muscles relaxed, the sword lowered.

There was no target remaining.

He had not seen how she had destroyed the beings that lay about them, nor did he think it was especially important. The point was, the way was once again clear. If this was the worst that Sabor could throw against them . . .

The woman frowned. "Your confidence is not warranted, Mr. Sanchez. She does not mean for us to die here, neither of us. I am certain she has special plans for myself, and it may well be that you are not to be left out of her scheme for the future. The two attacks against us were nothing more than stalling tactics." Ktara was looking at the sun. "There is yet more than another two full hours before the darkness begins to come. She will use that time to cause me to deplete my strength, until the night falls and she becomes even more powerful."

"In that case, we don't cooperate," Cam said. Once again the .357 Magnum carried a full six rounds. Snapping the cylinder shut, he tossed away the shell-box. It was empty. Six bullets, six deaths if his marksmanship held. He transferred the pistol to his left hand, retaining the heavy sword in his right. He felt sure he was going to need it.

He was not entirely correct.

The next fifteen or twenty minutes of their ascent went without incident. Then they were through the open gate and onto the grounds of the castle itself, Cam scanning the heights of the walls for potential

sources of danger. He felt like a fly entering the spider's parlor. His weapons aside, he was as if naked and helpless. If, for example, a rifleman or—more probably, in keeping with the opponents he'd faced so far—a bowman loosed a well-aimed arrow from up above, he'd had it. These old castles were bastions for the defense of those who had lived within their walls, effective huge shields for attacking armies. And he—

He laughed. Stalwart swordsman and victorious champion that he was, he was one man. One man with a pistol and a sword and a good measure of determination. Nonetheless, the armies who in days gone by had stormed this fortress must have had some amount of determination. And the walls still held firm . . .

“Mr. Sanchez—”

But she didn't have to say it. He saw it—them—quite clearly. In the stone courtyard the warrior and the woman had entered, there was now a reception committee. Half of them—numbering about thirty men—stood silently before what looked to be the main entrance to the castle proper. The others were scattered about the place. All of them held their lances in an upright position, stone still. All of them except for one who was at the far end of the courtyard.

That one, in heavy coal-black armor, sat astride a thick-bodied chestnut horse. The horse, snorting and pawing the earth impatiently, was decked out in full battle regalia. The man, whose face was hidden behind the black metal visor, was decked out with the

longest lance in the courtyard. It was a jousting lance.

From above came a pleasant laugh. Cam's eyes moved swiftly to a balcony some fifty feet above where he stood. They rested briefly upon the taut features of Damien Harmon, then moved slightly to the left of his employer. The woman was beautiful. Her words were like death knells.

"Hail, knight! You have come here to do battle. Very well, battle you shall receive. My champion accepts your challenge. Look to your weapons, knight!"

And now the laugh was harsh as her eyes focused briefly upon the black rider. Suddenly the horse no longer was pawing the cobblestones. The animal was charging.

Things happened fast.

Cam's Magnum snapped up and blasted two slugs at the black metal visor, then two more at the charging beast. *Nothing!* Of course, it had to be another of Sabor's mental creations. As the thought came to him, a cold feeling touched him directly behind the right ear. He whipped his body around to face it. Out of the corner of his eye he saw something black and fleet move swiftly across the courtyard for the open door. But he had no time to be sure of the thing's progress. He was too busy avoiding the thick butt-end of the lance that was coming around toward his bullet-shaped head like an overlarge baseball bat. He managed to move back before it connected for a home run. At least, he thought he did. It was hard to tell, because immediately afterward something else collided against the other side of his head.

If it wasn't a home run, it was at least a double. Or

so he thought as the cobblestones rushed up to meet his face. He winced in anticipation of contact, but the contact didn't come. At least, the pain of contact didn't. It simply couldn't get through the shroud of blackness that suddenly had blotted out everything.

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CHAPTER TEN

"A lot of killing?" Sabor said tauntingly. "It appears to me that your young friend was defeated rather easily, but do not be overly concerned. He is not dead, not yet. In fact, I rather like the idea you've given me."

Harmon said nothing, his eyes and taut face not moving from the place where Cam's body lay face down below him.

"A lot of killing," she repeated. "I think we shall see just how much your champion can take. An old castle such as this one is eminently suited for such a test. We shall see if he measures up to the heroic Aidom, whose bodily strength was matchless. We shall see if he shares the will of the crafty Ulysses, whose mind, once decided on winning, was rarely turned to defeat. We—rather, I—shall see things. As regards yourself, you shall be occupied with other matters."

She stepped toward the edge of the balcony, her eyes flashing. Immediately, the figures below moved into action, four of the weaponed men laying aside their lances and grasping the limbs of the unconscious Cam. Then she turned quickly toward Harmon.

"It is curious that you have not attempted to push me from this height."

"Not all that curious," he replied. "I'd be dead before I completed the movement necessary." His eyes flickered in the direction of the four lances that were inches from his head. "I'd rather remain alive, if I've got the choice."

She moved away behind him. "You do have the choice, Professor. In fact, I want you to live. I want very much that you should live—for the time being. There is much about you that interests me."

With that she turned her back and began to move from the room. At the same time, the hands of one of the lancers went to the handles of Harmon's wheelchair, and he too was in movement, following in the wake of the red-haired Sabor.

It was the first time that she'd left him alone since he'd encountered her. He had been afraid to sift through the thoughts that had been welling up just under his conscious mind, but now . . .

Afraid? Yes, admit it. He was very afraid. He had known fear before, all too many times in fact, but any man who is not a coward recognizes fear for what it is. The mind's way of warning you, of preparing you for the effort of will and strength that must be made. A man who knows no fear is lacking something, probably intelligence. Harmon had never

bothered to analyze what it was. But he had known fear, and he knew it now. Fear for himself, for Cam, and for the world.

The last was more of an abstraction. No man can fear for the rest of mankind. No man can visualize the end of the world as we know it—not really. Men who have dealt with nuclear bombs, men who on both sides of the world have planned the strategies of meeting holocaust with holocaust, perhaps come the closest, but even they cannot really internalize the numbers and percentages that are spewed out by their computer models. There had been novelists who had tried and, to Harmon's mind, had failed utterly. The reader was led to feel only for the few survivors, not for all the masses of humanity that were no longer a factor in the novels' plots. So, for him too, it was an abstraction, this fear he felt—or wanted to feel—for mankind. No, he was on safer ground fearing for Cam and himself. That he could internalize, that could make an impression vividly enough upon his psyche. And it amounted to much the same thing, especially as it touched upon himself. Because in this particular circumstance, with his own life the key to the life of another and that other being the only creature upon this earth that could stop the present threat . . .

His life was in fact the life of the world. Damien Harmon, as ruthless and vengeful and amoral as he was—*he* suddenly was the axis on which the entire world rotated. And if the axis were removed, if this comparatively insignificant life suddenly were snuffed out . . .

Himself. Cam. And Ktara. He had not missed the

fact that the woman garbed in black had vanished in the courtyard. He had not missed the fact that a huge black cat had streaked for the entrance to the castle. He wondered . . .

Sabor would not have missed those things either. Yet she had not commented upon Ktara's fate, only Cam's. Did that mean . . .

Meant what? The pent-up thoughts crowded his brain. Nightfall . . . not too long from now. He—Harmon—being saved for some special thing. Bait, yes. Then did she *know* that he was the key to . . . No, she did not. She knew only that Dracula had not killed him when he'd restored the vampire to life. She suspected some kind of sympathetic—there was that word again, that concept that more and more was becoming important to him—relationship between the count and the professor. But she did not know what it was. If she did, she would have had Harmon killed instantly, thus defeating her enemy in one easy stroke. So she did not know . . .

But perhaps she did. "*I have planned everything this time,*" she had said. She had spoken of Ktara's groveling. No doubt she would be most pleased to see the Son of the Dragon himself groveling before her. No doubt, none at all. She was going to destroy him, that was her aim. But she would have to do it dramatically, in a way that made him know she was triumphant over him, in a way that was *her* way, a way that would make up for all those past defeats. Yes, to her the revenge would be sweet, and the sweetness of the revenge was her guiding principle. That was something to remember, something to keep constantly in mind.

Because that just might be the something that would give Harmon his advantage. And when that advantage came, he wanted to be ready for it. It might save—the hell with the world—it might save *him!*

They had moved through a number of corridors and had traversed two long stone stairways upward into the high reaches of the castle. The two men carrying his wheelchair did not look all that strong, but he supposed they took their real strength from the mind of the woman who led the procession. In any event, that didn't matter. No, it did matter, everything mattered. Every fact, every confirmed suspicion, might yield the slight vantage point he sought, that tiny crack in her armor, that small vulnerability in what otherwise was a wall of invincibility.

“This is not the original throne of the castle, Professor, but it suits my plan much better. Do you find it to your liking?”

The room they had entered was huge, its ceiling high, its walls covered with now-faded Near East tapestries that dated back to the medieval days of spice trading. Although the sun could not yet have slipped down behind the horizon, the hall was as if clothed with night. Two vertical gashes in the stone wall were the only openings to the outside, and they were sufficient only to allow thin streams of the light beyond into the room. And although upon each of the four walls of the room torches were placed at what should have been effective intervals, still the details of the place seemed to be out of focus, shrouded with

a kind of dark misty gloom. And yet, there were not all that many details to see.

There were, of course, the blank-faced mind-slaves of Sabor. In long, gray robes they silently lined the walls of the room, their outstretched hands holding long lances vertically upright. There were women as well as men among them, a fact that at first struck Harmon as odd, then he remembered where Sabor had collected her castle guards from. He shuddered that he had thought her beautiful. No, she was a scourge, an abomination. She had to be destroyed. But she could not be destroyed. Ktara had made that very plain. The most that could be done was to contain her, to place her in a nonfunctioning state, so that she could do nothing, could do no more of—of this.

The way her mindless ones could stand stock still like that, could hold those spears directly upward without a muscle faltering . . .

The vision of an entire world's population moving about like robots came to him. He took his eyes from the robed retinue and directed them to the center of the room.

The gold of the raised dais dully reflected the light from the torches. Upon the dais were two jewel-encrusted thrones.

"Two," he commented. "Why two thrones?"

"There are two of us, Professor. I have always ruled with a man at my side. For a brief time, tonight, you shall play the role of my consort—but only for a time." Her eyes communicated to the two men who had guided Harmon's wheelchair to the place. They in turn lifted the chair once more, taking

it and its occupant to the dais and upward onto its high plane, placing it next to one of the thrones. Without a break in their movement, they lifted the man mechanically from his chair to the gilded straight-backed seat.

"For a time," Sabor repeated. Then she seemed to consider something within her own mind. "We shall leave your wheeled chair where it is, Professor. The Dark Lord is one who appreciates symbols and your normal means of transportation is very symbolic of the frailty of the world's creatures. It shall symbolize that there is no one and no thing that is a match for Sabor's will, that against the mind of Sabor all men are no more than helpless cripples. Do you find my interpretation of your clumsy means of transportation accurate?"

Harmon looked at his chair, then back at Sabor. "There may be something in what you say. However, another interpretation is satisfying to myself—namely, that the mind of man has the inventive power to overcome the frailty of the body."

She laughed. "A turtle, Professor Harmon, has the sense to move from a blazing fire. Would you call its mind powerful?"

"Comparatively speaking, no. The brain of a turtle has not the power of the brain of man. Just as—as you've made demonstrably clear—the brain of man has not the power of Sabor."

She looked pleased. Then her eyes seemed to mock him. "I wonder about the sincerity of that statement. All men are fools, Professor, but you are less a fool than most. Are you merely saying that so as not to displease me?"

Harmon shrugged. "The man who purposely displeases Sabor is a fool indeed."

"I wonder . . . I wonder if your young associate would be such a fool."

The smile on her lips now was nothing if it was not cruel. "Professor, I must leave you alone for a short while. I trust you will not attempt to move from where you are."

Harmon looked at the array of armed robots surrounding him. Especially he looked at the four men with lances who faced him from the four points of the base of the dais.

"You have my word," he said solemnly.

Slowly the blackness into which Cam Sanchez had been plunged began to yield, to allow pinpoints of white and yellow and orange into his conscious mind. There was a dull, pulsating pain in the back of his head and the feeling of wetness there as well. A sticky wetness that, though unseen, registered red in his mind. As he tried to move his hands to that throbbing place, his eyes snapped open. His hands were restrained, they couldn't move, but as he tried, arrows of new pain pierced the full length of his body.

His head motions, as he moved to see the cause of the new pains, brought about even more. Resting his head back against the surface of the barrel-shaped device against which the length of his body already was stretched, thanks to the thick ropes that held in place his wrists and ankles, he inhaled deeply—or started to. The expansion of his chest caused new pains in muscles and tendons.

A very effective instrument, the medieval rack.

Carefully now, he turned his head on his neck so that his eyes could see to the left. He then repeated the process to the other side. Then he closed his eyes. As far as he could, he had seen all there was to see. There wasn't very much, but what there was, he didn't like.

The room itself was square and small, with its entrance hard to determine, due to the darkness of the room that was broken only by three wall-hung torches, one on each of three of the four walls, and the flickering hearth that formed at least half of the fourth wall, immediately to his front. Still the illumination was enough for him to see the variety of chains and manacles and whips and larger stationery devices within the room. The place had but one purpose, the one he was at present experiencing.

The ceiling of the room was not high, in fact it was low enough for him to make out clearly the collection of cobwebs in each of the four corners above him. The place felt very damp, in spite of the fire, which he realized was beginning now to cause his bare feet a mild discomfort.

The thought made him want to laugh, but the tight constraints of his body made him think better of it. His body . . .

They had taken his boots and socks and his jacket and shirt. The wide belt had been taken from his trousers, which, although this was no time for concerns of modesty, he was thankful they'd left where they were. He was of course weaponless, but he was hardly in a position to take advantage of a complete-

ly outfitted armory, had it been six inches from where he lay.

Overall, it was not the best of circumstances. It could have been worse, however. One, there could have been someone else with him in the place. Two, that someone else could have been diligently applying himself to turning the crank to the right side of the rack. Decidedly, things could have been a lot worse.

As if triggered by his very thought, things got a lot worse.

At least, he now knew where the door of the place was, he reflected, as from directly behind him the blackness of the wall got just a bit blacker and the footfalls met his ears.

The man who came around to the front of Cam was built like a bull or, rather, like a sumo wrestler. The shoulder and chest muscles looked as powerful as Cam's own, even though the bared upper half of the man showed a great deal of fat around the middle. His face held the blank look of the men Cam had killed earlier in the day, but there was one essential difference. This man Cam recognized. He had been one of the pair that had been jockeying the large crate in the back of the pickup truck—one of those who had taken Damien Harmon from the inn.

"Frightening looking, is he not?" the woman said, stepping to a place beside the man. She, too, Cam had seen before. She had been one of the last things he'd seen before he'd gotten clobbered. Close up, her face and figure were even more captivating.

Captivating. An excellent word choice.

"Very awesome," she continued, still referring to the sumo type. "It might surprise you to know that

Wilhelm is—or was—a very successful industrialist in Hamburg. A pity that he chose this particular time for a holiday and that his poor mouse of a wife pressured him into a tour of the Rhineland castles. But Wilhelm no longer cares about his business or his wife or anything, for that matter, except serving me. Is not that right, Wilhelm?”

Wilhelm said nothing. His face seemed frozen into the expressionless lines that characterized the faces of the others of Sabor’s pets that Cam had met. His eyes did not even blink.

The woman smiled down at Cam. “As you can see, most of my slaves are not much in the way of company to me. They afford me little diversion. I have wondered about you, however. I watched you during your ascent to my fortress. You handled yourself very well. Are you by profession a warrior? I have asked you a question. Kindly answer it.”

“I was a policeman.”

“In America.”

He winced. He’d never before realized how many motions were involved in the simple act of talking, motions that in his present circumstances were most painful. “In America, yes.”

“I have learned much of the place you call the New World. I shall have to visit there soon.” Again she smiled. “I watched you kill. You are proficient at killing. Do you enjoy it?”

“That depends—on who I’m killing.”

“Well answered, Cameron Sanchez. Don’t look surprised. Of course, I know your name. I also know much of your relationship with Professor Harmon and with the one you call Dracula.”

"The professor—"

"He is alive and unharmed—as of this moment. Later it will become necessary for me to dispose of him. And to dispose of you, too, perhaps. But perhaps not. Will you serve me willingly, Cameron Sanchez?"

"Like him?" The nod of his head toward the ex-industrialist was painful.

"No, not like him. Sometimes I prefer to have servants whose minds are their own. Only if they have certain characteristics, however, one of them being a fine physique and another being the mental—and physical—capacity to please me. I ask you if you will serve me. I desire an answer."

"If I refuse?"

"Death. Slowly and painfully."

"Lady—you've got yourself a willing servant."

She laughed. "Already I find you amusing! Wit is something I enjoy, you will find. But also I admire a man of iron constitution. I must test you for that now. Wilhelm."

In three strides the big German was at Cam's right. His thick hands wrapped themselves around the crank handle. The crank handle moved ever so slightly.

The pain that shot through Cam's body was not at all slight. Again, as the clicking sound entered his right ear, his entire frame was a collection of searing sensations. If a man could last long enough on this thing, his back finally would be broken, but no man could hold on that long. Long before the point of the spine snapping, his arms would leave his shoulder sockets, or—if those tendons and ligaments held—

his lower stomach would rip apart like so much stretched cellophane.

Again he could hear Wilhelm diligently applying himself at the crank. Again, new layers of pain were added upon those he already was feeling, his jaws clenching tightly, his eyes closing, then opening again. Yes, the pain was less if there was something, anything to distract the mind from it. With the eyes closed, that was all there was—just the flood of pain that exploded in a cave of the mind's darkness.

"More, Wilhelm," Sabor said. Her bright eyes seeming to feast upon the sweat-drenched body of the Puerto Rican giant. And then he could no longer look at those eyes of hers. He closed his own, yet they—those other eyes did not disappear. Green and yellow, they . . .

Green and yellow?

Sabor's eyes weren't—

And then suddenly he no longer felt the pain. It was as if the hands upon the crank had stopped their turning or, rather, had turned back the handle to the point where it was when he had begun. But that was not the case. A corner of Cam's mind still heard the continuous notching sound. Wilhelm still was adding pressure. It was just that Cam no longer could feel the result! Was it overload? Had his nerves been pushed—or pulled—beyond their capacity to register? Was it that or was it something else?

Green and yellow eyes . . .

He opened his own eyelids and stared into the flashing white-red eyes of Sabor.

He grinned at her.

“Enough, Wilhelm. Turn back the crank—quickly!”

And now the feeling came back to his body, his limbs, his midsection, his neck, and the muscles that enveloped his skull.

“You did very well,” Sabor said to him. “You have been found worthy—of further testing. Bring the iron.”

Wilhelm disappeared for a moment in the direction of the fireplace. Cam could not lift up his head to follow what the mindless man did there, but he did not have to wait long to learn. The sumo’s own hands must have been burning from just holding the far end of the iron. The near end was red-hot. It was but three inches from top to bottom, its width somewhat less. It was reversed from Cam’s viewpoint, but he had no difficulty deciphering what it was.

Steaming and scarlet, it was a gothic letter S.

“Certain of my subjects are privileged to wear my mark, Cameron Sanchez. How fortunate that your surname’s initial letter is what it is. Wilhelm.”

Again Wilhelm approached him on the right side. Cam’s eyes and face turned from the heat of the branding iron as it came closer. There was one instant of intense pain as the smell of burning flesh flooded his nostrils. His body lurched from the place where the end of the iron had touched him—a point just above where the side of his right bicep met his massive shoulder muscle. He exhaled the pent-up air in his lungs, then felt his body settle back to its still-strained configuration. He turned his face toward the burnt flesh of his shoulder. He could see just a corner of the mark, black as pitch. But he felt no

pain, none. Again his eyes found Sabor's. No, they were not green, not yellow.

Again, he grinned at her.

"Again you please me, Cameron Sanchez. Your control is excellent. You did very well all on your own—even before you had help!"

She turned her face from him, her eyes scanning the room. Then she again looked down at him, her fingers touching the expanse of his chest, the hollow of his stomach.

"I must keep you this way for a while," she said, "but there will be a time later when we can enjoy each other properly. You *will* wait, won't you?"

She laughed, then her face hardened as again her eyes scanned the room. "I know you are somewhere near, cat-bitch, and that pleases me. Your power is enough to block me from his mind, yet I do not yet wish his mind. But keep up your guard. Else I will locate you and destroy you. I shall in any case, after your master has satisfied my quest for revenge."

Sabor moved past where Cam could see her, toward the heavy door that was beyond his range of vision. Her voice, however, told him that the lines on her face still were hard, her eyes narrowed with hate:

"You are doomed, Ktara. Though you have hidden yourself well with matrices of thought waves, you have been stupid. I cannot find you, but I do not have to. It is enough that you are where I intended for you to be. Precisely here in this room. I bid you farewell for the time being, my ancient enemy, for the darkness approaches. But you need not be concerned

about darkness—not you. I’ve taken care that your reception is proper.”

Her strident laugh was cut off by the closing door, the heavy *click* of which was immediately followed up by the roar of what sounded like a large wounded animal. But it was no animal. Rather, it was the sheets of flame that suddenly formed a thick inner wall around the walls of stone.

And suddenly, directly to the left of his chest, was the dark woman with the green eyes. But the green eyes were blocked by crossed hands as Ktara cringed with unholy terror.

“She has won!” Ktara cried. “*She has won!*”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"My powers! I cannot hold onto them! The fire!"

"Can you get me loose?" Cam urged. "Damn it—can you get me free from this thing? *Ktaral!*"

Her back was pressed against the side of the rack. As she turned toward him, her hands still attempting to ward off the sight of the sheets of flame that lined the room, he saw that she was afraid. It came to him that he'd never seen this woman in such a state before. It also came to him that she was his only way of getting free. She had to move!

"Ktaral!"

"I . . . can't . . . The fire . . ."

"The hell with the fire!"

"My powers . . . I'm losing . . ."

His voice was brutal, and he meant it to be. For one thing, it had to be hard and loud to crash through the roaring flames, but for another he had to pierce the woman's thinking:

"Damn you, you need no special power to free me. Cut me loose with your hands—or your cat-claws—or your teeth, but get me free!"

Nodding dumbly, she pushed herself from his chest toward where his hands were spread above him. He could not see her now, did not know how she was accomplishing what he hoped she was in fact accomplishing, but his forearms suddenly had the feeling of weight upon them, weight and the silkiness of fur. How long it took, he could not say, but there came an instant when his hands were free. In a movement that drove sharp streaks of pain through his shoulders and chest and stomach, his hands moved to his ankles. The knots were good ones, but the rope was thick and easy to maneuver. He sat up, stayed sitting for a number of seconds before he dared to place his feet on the floor and stand.

He didn't fall down. So much for small favors.

Instinctively, he put his arms around the trembling woman in black, whose white face looked paler than he'd ever seen it. As he did so, he saw in full the dark S that had been burnt into his shoulder flesh.

"Thanks," he said. "For everything."

"It makes no difference now," she said, her hands on his chest pushing herself gently from him, her green eyes looking into his. "She brought you here to this dungeon, suspecting that I might follow. This—" she quickly glanced over his massive shoulder at the wall of flame behind him, "—this was why. She has won."

"Not yet," he said. "She may kill us, but your master—"

"I've seen what she plans for him. She will defeat him as well."

Cam was silent for a time. "Anyway, thanks."

She looked into his face. "Why do you thank me?" Her voice was strangely soft.

"Because of what you did. Following me here, helping me, keeping me sane, and keeping me alive."

The smile on her face was weak, but it was there. "You are not an evil person, Mr. Sanchez. There are many good things about you, some of which I admire. But I did not come here to save your life. I don't want you to think that I did. It was your mind I wanted to protect, your thoughts."

Cam stepped back from her, stunned. "My—"

"Thoughts. She cannot pierce the mind of the professor, but yours is not so protected. And yours also carries the secret of how she might easily destroy my master. All this day I have shielded your—"

She stopped, her eyes still on his face. He had no idea of what message his expression conveyed, but he had a suspicion. Hell, she didn't need the look on his face to tell her what was in his mind. She—

His arms caught her before she collapsed to the floor. "Hold on, lady, we're not dead yet. Not me, not you."

"Do you really care if . . . I . . ."

But if he heard the question, his mind was on something else. As he lifted her back to her feet, he nodded at the walls of fire.

"If that was real fire, we'd be choking by now. The oxygen in this room would long ago have been eaten up. And look at the way it just hangs there. This fire

is consuming nothing—nothing. It's—what do you call it? Mental? *Spectral*. It doesn't exist!"

"It . . ."

She suddenly felt very heavy in Cam's arms.

Sabor? Alexandru Thorka considered the name and opened his mouth to tell the dark woman named Ktara that he'd not heard the name before. But no, he'd already told her that, hadn't he? He thought he had.

"*Sabor*?" he asked. But no one answered. It seemed there was no one there to answer. He was quite alone. Alone and—curiously—not at all where he remembered being. He was in his own room, sitting on his bed, but he had been in Harmon's room, standing up, as he recalled.

Yes. And Harmon had not been there. The dark woman and the young giant, they . . .

They had spoken of the castle up on the hill. Thorka heaved himself up and paced to the window. Even as he did so, the thought struck him that it was dark now in his room. The view of the hill beyond verified the fact.

Night had fallen. But it was mid-afternoon when . . .

When what? He had been about to question the young woman. Yes, about the name *Sabor*. No, he *had* questioned her. She, in turn, said something to the effect that it was unfortunate he'd had to hear the name. Then . . .

Then there was nothing. Nothing until he came to just now in this room. Something had happened to him. A trance? Perhaps, but now it was over. He had

the full command of his faculties, and he intended to use them. If this flame-haired woman, Sabor—it had to be her name—had Damien Harmon, Thorka was not going to stand idly by . . .

Which is what he'd been doing for hours!

Hurriedly he moved to the door. Locked. Very well, he had a key some place. But a search of his pockets proved that to be incorrect. Perhaps on the nightstand or bureau. He snapped on the light and gasped.

He had forgotten about the body of Petre Ulescu. It lay where he had placed it on the carpet, its pale face looking upward at the ceiling as if it had been frozen by some Medusa-face painted there. Furtively Thorka glanced upward. There was no face, nothing.

There also was no key anywhere within the room.

He examined the lock. In motion pictures and spy novels, the hero usually was able to fiddle around for a couple of seconds with a paper clip or a woman's hat pin or something and—eureka—the door would spring open as if by magic. Notwithstanding the fact that there was no paper clip or hat pin within these four walls, Thorka would not have known what to do with them had they danced into the key slot upon their own volition. He simply was not the stuff from which the heroes of spy novels were fashioned. Standing, he considered kicking the door from its hinges.

Very briefly, he considered it. His party already had this day smashed through one of the doors of the inn, and the management might be expected to be a little testy about a second, even if he should have the physical wherewithal to get the job done. And with a

corpse occupying a rather noticeable position on the floor . . .

There was, of course, the window. It was only two stories above the ground, and obviously the men who had taken Damien Harmon had left the building that way. Thorka turned out the lights and approached the potential exit. Lifting up the window, he craned his neck forward to see what there was to be seen.

It did look like quite a way down. Other than that there was nothing to be seen. Only the Volkswagen minibus parked under the branches of two thick trees. The little Fiat he had rented was gone. Thorka scowled. There had been talk in the inn of a group of car thieves working the district, concentrating especially upon the cars of tourists. If they had taken his car . . .

He shook his head. Indignation was out of place now. It was in fact what his American friends would call a stalling tactic. The matter at hand was whether or not he was going to go out this window and attempt to climb down to the ground. Of course, he would not want to be seen doing so . . .

He waited a full minute. No one came into his range of vision. He sighed and pushed one of his squat legs up and over the windowsill. Then he pulled it back. He realized he didn't have the foggiest notion about how one climbed down the face of a building. Ah!

Scanning the interior of his room, his eyes rested upon the bed. Of course. Now, if only he could tie knots that would hold . . .

They held, as did the hot-water radiator he used to anchor the makeshift rope. Halfway down, he missed

a footing and skinned his left kneecap. His heart was beating like a well-pump just before final breakdown as, puffing for breath, he felt his feet touch ground. Looking around furtively, he half expected a heavy clap on the shoulder and a demand for an explanation by some member of the local law enforcement establishment. "*A little off-season to be playing Father Christmas—ja, mein Herr?*" But there still was no one in sight, fortunately. Unfortunately, a new problem had presented itself.

The line of knotted bedclothes stood out in the pale moonlight as markedly as a ship's sail. He simply couldn't leave it there where its presence would cause someone sooner or later to investigate. Perhaps if he tugged hard enough . . .

The knots still held as if his life depended upon them.

There was only one option open to him. Scowling at his own feeling of foolishness, he went around to the front of the inn, got a door key from the deskman, walked upstairs and into his room, and brought his rope up inside. When the job was completed, he sat down on the now-stripped bed. No, Alexandru Thorka decided, he definitely was not of the stuff from which the heroes of novels were made. Nonetheless, the people who possessed those qualities obviously were busy elsewhere, which left Thorka to accomplish the job.

What job? he asked himself. And now he realized that he had no idea of the job or its components. He also realized that the others—Harmon, Sanchez, and the woman—might well want him to stay completely

out of the affair. But it was, after all, *his* affair in the first place, was it not? It was. Therefore . . .

He turned out the lights and locked the door from the outside, carefully checking to make certain the latch had clicked into place. Then, pocketing the key, he went downstairs and to the outside, walking briskly around the side of the building to the rear and to the trees under which the minibus was parked. He suddenly realized that he did not have the key to operate the vehicle. He cursed. So many obstructions blocking the path of the would-be hero! But as he opened the door to the driver's side, he found he was mistaken. There was a key in the ignition. A whole ring of keys dangled from the one that had been inserted. But that was not the first thing that grabbed his attention.

The thing that emptied his lungs with a rush of expelled air was the crumpled body of the youth jammed up under the steering wheel. The upside-down face of the young man was frozen into a silent scream, choked off perhaps by the rivers of blood that had flowed mouthward from the great side-to-side gash in the throat that loomed like a dark volcano crater in the youth's head. Blood. It was everywhere, all over the front seat and the flooring.

And behind the front seat, too. Thorka again gasped when he saw the second body. Another young man who had died in a manner similar to the first. Beyond him, in the rear of the bus, was that large packing crate. The lid of the huge box was open.

Mingled with the foul smell of the blood was an odor of damp, rich earth.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Not that it would ever matter to Alexandru Thorka, their names were Rolf and Gunter. Although they were both of the same age—nineteen—and approximately of the same lean, hungry build, one of them earlier this night had been frightened, the other slightly amused by the fright. This was Gunter's first time, while Rolf was an old hand at this sort of thing.

"Should we not wait until early morning?" Gunter asked. "Should we just be walking up to the thing like this? Shouldn't one of us sneak up on it in the shadows and see if the keys we have are right? Shouldn't—"

Rolf sneered. "Shouldn't you shut your infernal mouth?" He shook his head as they walked toward the minibus. "Look, if anybody sees us, they will not think anything suspicious is going on—not if we don't *look* suspicious. The only ones who possibly can

cause us trouble are the owners of the bus—and that one, the big American, left with his woman in another car this afternoon. I watched them.”

“But they might come back,” Gunter suggested.

“Possible, in which case, we either drive the thing like blazes out of here to the garage—or we run like blazes without the bus. It depends upon the circumstances.”

“But is it yet dark enough? Perhaps we should wait . . .”

“It is dark enough. The night is not going to get much darker than it is now. Here, take these keys—and stop fidgeting!”

They were parallel to the driver’s door now, and Rolf gave Gunter a slight push toward it. The door itself was not locked, but to Gunter the opening of it was an explosion in the stillness that permeated the area behind the inn. “Rolf—what are you going to . . .”

Rolf looked to the rear of the bus. “Just you try the keys. There’s something in the back there that I want to have a look at. A big box. It might be something of value, and if it is we don’t want to just turn it over to old Schenk for just the price he pays us for the vehicle. Right? Maybe it’s something we might want to drop off some place first—and then find somebody whose price is right for us.”

“C-can’t we take a look at that later?”

“Look, you just do as I say. Only one person can work the keys anyway. Be quick about it and natural, and don’t look so scared.”

And yet, even as Rolf slid open the unlocked door of the bus, he felt something was wrong. If the crate

was valuable, would they have left it like this—unlocked and out in the open? But no, that was the way with the tourists, that was what made them such easy marks. The same people who would carefully lock up their homes and the rooms within their homes, when they came out on a holiday acted as if the world had changed, that everyone everywhere could be trusted. Fine. It made Rolf's work so much the easier. Yet . . .

The box itself. It was long, almost like . . . well, like a large coffin. He shook his head and chuckled to himself as he climbed behind the second seat. Gunter, now behind the wheel, turned at the sound of Rolf's laugh. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing. Get to work."

As Gunter began trying the keys in the ignition system, Rolf reached out to grasp the top of the crate. His fingers shrank back at the first touch. The box felt . . . cold, sort of. Not just its temperature, there was something else, something . . .

Foolish. He was behaving like Gunter now. He thrust his hands forward again, this time to the sides of what obviously was a lid. He tugged upward tentatively. Nailed down shut. Except that he could not see the nails. But there had to be nails, it must just be the type of nail that didn't have a head, a finishing nail, probably—or maybe he just couldn't see the heads in the darkness. But . . .

People didn't use finishing nails to board up a crate, did they? And the moonlight filtering downward through the windows of the bus gave him an excellent view of the—

"Rolf—none of the keys work. I can't get a fit!"

"Keep trying. One of them has to fit!" *Calm, keep calm*, he told himself. But Gunter was making him nervous. Or was it Gunter? Maybe it was . . .

Again he pulled on the lid of the crate, this time using more force. Again it stayed shut. Maybe the top wasn't supposed to open? Maybe one of the ends.

Click!

"What was that?" Rolf said.

Gunter: "What was what?"

"Nothing." But there was something. It seemed to Rolf that it came from inside the crate. *Click!* There it was again. As if some kind of fastener or clamp were being unclamped . . .

But that was impossible. Nonetheless . . .

Click!

His hands jumped from the crate. This time he'd not only heard the slight sound, his fingers had *felt* it—felt the small vibration caused by . . .

Imagination. It had to be that. That's all it was. With Gunter making him so damned nervous.

"*Haven't you found that key yet?*" he snapped toward the front.

"It's not here! The right one isn't here, I tell you!"

"Stop your infernal whining and—"

"And what? What do you want from me—*what?*"

But Rolf didn't answer. He couldn't answer. His mouth was wide open, as were his eyes. The lid of the crate had moved. All by itself it had moved and still was moving and—

Rolf screamed—or tried to. Before the cry reached his lips it was cut off by the fingers of the long white hand that reached out from the opening in the crate and tightened around his throat. And his eyes bulged

out even more when the entire lid slid to the side of the bus interior. *The face . . .*

"I thank you," the rich voice came through the smiling lips of the large man in the coffin. "You have brought me needed refreshment."

Gunter's head whipped around. "*Mein Gott!*"

His hands grabbed for the door latch, but they somehow would not function properly. And the great black hulk that loomed over Rolf seemed to turn, and a bone-white face smiled at him, the lips and lower jaw soaked with—

"*Mein Gott!*"

The white-faced man spoke softly, but his words carried the nature of a command that could not be countered. "I am doubly pleased, for my thirst is great. Please—be in no hurry to depart. I shall be with you in a matter of moments."

Be—with me! Gunter's limbs began to tremble. *Nein, nein!* I must get out of this place, I must . . . But he could not. He could do nothing other than gaze transfixed at the rear of the bus, where now the figure in black had returned to—

Oh, God—*Rolf's throat!*

And then the red eyes were upon him, bloodred eyes with centers of hot white suns. Oh, my God . . .

"Do not be frightened, young man," someone was saying. "It is but death you are about to meet, no more than that. Death, the comforter, the final relaxation. Yes, that is right—relax, yield willingly to what comes. Yes . . ."

And Gunter saw now that the man was right, that he had to be right. His voice was so comforting, his

manner so assured. A nobleman, probably, one of good family and careful breeding. And Gunter himself—a nobody, who knew nothing. It was sort of an honor that he had been chosen for this—this—

“*Nein—nein!*”

“But yes, my young friend.” Those teeth—and all that blood, Rolf’s blood, which soon was to be followed by his own—

“*Nein!* Please, I did not mean to steal your car. I’m sorry. Please, I beg of you.”

The fiery eyes burnt into his brain. “There is no need. I do not require a plea for forgiveness. I grant it fully without your asking. You see? Are you not satisfied that I hold yon no ill will?”

Gunter relaxed, he smiled. Yes, he was satisfied. There was just one thing. “I . . . I don’t want to die.”

“Ah,” the red lips of the white-faced man emitted. “As to that, I must ask *your* forgiveness. Do you grant it?”

Gunter was about to do so, then changed his mind. Frantically he changed it, but as he felt the teeth of the vampire slice into his throat, he suspected—correctly—that it was much too late.

It took Thorka less than a minute to find the right key. When the motor of the minibus churned over, he realized that he was sweating like a heavily worked farm animal. Dr. Alexandru Thorka, he said to himself as he slipped the gearshift into first and the bus began to move. The well-renowned doctor of anthropology, archaeology, and other scientific fields. Academic man at his highest attainment—now furtively

driving a vehicle through the streets of a village in a foreign land, a vehicle containing the bodies of two youths who had died horribly, a vehicle leaving the grounds of an inn where, in the great doctor's room, another corpse lay in the state of *rigor mortis*. And, in the rear of the vehicle whose motor he now clumsily and noisily managed to place into third gear, that abominable crate, inside of which was a still more abominable casket.

He had taken only the time necessary to push the body that had been pinned under the wheel to the right side of the front seat and then the additional time to locate the correct key to the ignition. In that time he had made up his mind at least as to the direction he would be taking. Not for a moment did he consider the possibility of walking away from the minibus and its terrible contents. It was a certainty that the bodies were connected with the mission that had brought his friends here—the mission he himself had urged upon them. Even if that were not so—even if the deaths were totally unrelated, if in fact the only connection was that empty coffin to the rear—he would not allow his friends to be swept into charges of murder. Not if he could help it. Not even if they were guilty of such a charge. He had known the game to be a deadly one from the start. Even had he not known, the fact that the body of Petre Ulescu now lay in death in his own room had emblazoned the truth upon Thorka's brain. He had asked for help and his friends had come. As he had suspected, they had a tool that might be effective in such a circumstance. Who, then, was he to blanch when visited

with the sight of the aftermath of the employment of that tool?

And yet . . .

To fight fire with fire. An old axiom, but did oldness mean rightness? If this woman—Sabor—was a demon from Hell itself, did that justify their use of another demon to defeat her? And if it did, what then should become of their chosen instrument *after* the battle was won? If it was Count Dracula that Harmon was using . . .

If?

There were no ifs about it. Not logically at least. True, Thorka himself never had laid eyes upon the vampire, but had it not been he who had assisted Damien Harmon in his quest to visit Dracula Mountain? A one-night visit, as it turned out, and a mysterious, separate departure from the place by Harmon's giant assistant. Yes, their actions would support the theory that they had in fact discovered—and taken with them—the body of the legendary vampire of Transylvania.

And then later, when Thorka had written them regarding the strange doings in Arefu and the supposed descendants of the count doing excavation work on the great mountain, it had not surprised him that Harmon had come immediately, bringing with him, in addition to Sanchez, the woman called Ktara—and the large crate. The crate that bumped along in the rear of the bus even now. And now, now that he actually had seen the white satin lining of the coffin and the rich soil on its bottom . . .

He no longer suspected. He *knew*. But knowing brought with it its own responsibility. This night, in

a very few moments when he was out of the village and on his way up that dark hill, moving upward to the castle at its peak—this night he could discharge that responsibility in full.

The soil in the casket. All he had to do was scatter it to the four winds. Sometime before morning, the vampire would seek his resting place, and when he found it—found it without that long-protected earth . . .

It would mean the end of Count Dracula.

An enormous responsibility, Thorka reasoned. But there was the question of whether he had the *right*. The count, if Thorka's reasoning was correct, belonged to Damien Harmon. *Belonged*. As property? A moot question, one that Thorka could not answer. Certainly not here and now. Perhaps if he were sitting behind his desk in his University office, a warmed snifter of fine cognac in his hand, then perhaps . . .

But if that were his current situation, the question would not have come up, certainly not in its present enormity.

Nonetheless, he would think about it as time allowed. After all, there was no need for him to rush a decision. Besides, he was certain there would be other work for him in the meantime, and now as the minibus started upwards on its long climb to the peak of the hill, he wondered whether he would be up to it. He wondered, in fact, whether any of them would be up to it.

In the stone room with the blazing walls, Cam knelt beside Ktara, holding her body to him. No longer

was the woman trembling. It was if she hadn't the strength even for that, as if all but the very essentials of life had been drained from her. He had tried once to lead her through the blaze to the place where the door was, but she had shrunk back with such an expression of stark terror, that he found he could not force her. It was not only a mental prohibition that made forcing her impossible. It was physical as well. She seemed rooted to the spot, impossible to move. He'd then tried to go it alone, leaving her kneeling beside the rack, but that, too, proved impossible. Spectral flames they might be, but the searing heat that blocked his passage to the exit felt more than real enough against his skin. The fire still appeared to be consuming nothing, but he felt dead sure that if he tried to pass through it, he'd never make it. And yet he had to do something!

Harmon had been in the woman's clutches for hours. The daylight surely was gone by now, which meant that the count—

Yes, where the hell was the count? Didn't *he* care enough for Ktara to . . .

"A touching scene," Count Dracula said.

He had appeared suddenly, as if materializing from nothing. Yet the great door on the other side of the wall of flames was open. Now, as he looked down from his massive height at the kneeling man and woman, his eyebrows arched up, his face taking on an expression of feigned concern.

Cam rose to his feet. "Help her," he said through his teeth.

"It does not serve my purpose," the count replied.

"Master . . ." Her voice was very weak, her head

barely able to lift toward him. "Please, Master . . . release us . . ."

Dracula smiled. "No, not yet. It may be that I find pleasure now and then to see you in complete helplessness. A measure of humility would serve you well, my dear."

"Count—"

"Stand where you are, Mr. Sanchez." There was no mistaking the deadly warning tone of the vampire's voice as he extended the fingers of his right hand toward the huge bullet head of the Puerto Rican. "The time of your death is not yet—not unless you choose it to be."

"Help her," Cam repeated. "You need her."

The count nodded. "I need her very much. She in fact is serving me right now, and serving me well. These flames, Mr. Sanchez. They take a certain effort to maintain, mental effort on the part of the one for whom I have come. A small effort, perhaps, but nonetheless one that is diverted from myself. Therefore, my Ktara serves my purpose well by remaining here—until after my rendez-vous."

"Master . . . this time. It is not like the other times. She . . . she has prepared . . ."

"And what is it that she has prepared?"

"Your doom."

"Precisely."

Cam turned to the woman. Her face had again turned toward the floor. Whether she could not answer or simply would not, he couldn't tell. When his eyes left her form, his fists were ready.

But the vampire no longer was with them.

In the huge throne room above, the mind-slaves of Sabor had begun to sing. It was a kind of medieval religious chant or perhaps more like a Homeric Greek chorus, but the droning scale was unfamiliar to Harmon, as was the language. There was an ancientness to the thing that conjured up in the professor's mind the extreme polarities of a pale full moon shining down upon a white poplar icescape and of a bubbling pool of lava-flame far beneath the crusty surface of the earth. The voices matched the dead look of the singers' faces. There was no trace of emotion, merely a fatalistic acceptance of what was and what was to be, voices devoid of all feeling, devoid especially of any kind of hope.

In her robe of red satin, Sabor looked up from before the bottom of the dais and laughed harshly.

"They sing, Professor, of that primeval fusing of opposite elements, of that process through which light and darkness combine to create life and to negate it as well through death. The song is appropriate for this time, because soon now, very soon now, the moment will be here."

"The moment is here!" Count Dracula said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

He stood, his black figure framed majestically by the great open doorway. The silence that abruptly followed the hall-filling chorus seemed to Harmon thick enough to slice with a knife. There was a heavy electricity building up rapidly throughout the room. Harmon could feel it, knew it was there, and yet for the moment the count was acting as if there was nothing for anyone to show the slightest concern about.

His manner, as he stepped into the room, was like that of an honored guest at a function of the nobility, a guest who was a bit late in his arrival. Curiously, although he acknowledged Sabor's presence with a brief incline of his head, the next words in his richly cultured accent were for Harmon.

"Good evening, Professor. You are looking well."

Harmon nodded. He was not precisely sure if the count was playing the game properly, but he was in

no position to take exception. "It is good of you to show concern for my health, Count Dracula."

The count bowed deeply before the throne. "Ah, Professor, I forget my proprieties." He straightened and gazed at the flame-haired woman whose nostrils flared and whose face wore an expression that showed her already to be tasting her triumph. "You and I, Professor, have not been properly introduced—not for an occasion such as this one." He extended a hand toward where the woman stood, some fifteen feet from him. "Would you be so kind as to do the honors, my lady?"

She inclined her forehead just a bit, a short bow that was as mocking as had been the vampire's. "Courtesy becomes you, Dark One."

He smiled. "There never should be a need for ignoring basic social amenities."

"Or for failing to use whatever strategem one can to one's advantage," she completed. "No, you who now call yourself Count Dracula, I shall not be so easily tricked into uttering your real name. Not now. Perhaps later, when you crawl before me . . ."

The vampire shrugged. "Then, my apologies, Professor. It appears that even the common formalities are to be dispensed with."

He turned back to Sabor. "And so, my red-haired one, what is it that makes you believe you can best me this time?"

Harmon instantly felt that the room had become a sort of great wind tunnel like the kind aircraft manufacturers use to test new designs. It was as if he were caught up in the vortex of a tornado that

screamed obscenities into his ears along with the pounding drone of the primeval chorus that again had begun to echo from the stone walls. The flames of the torches upon those walls seemed to twist and bend radically to the sides and up and downward, the color of the fire itself changing with each passing moment. Harmon himself felt twisted, pushed and pulled out of his physical shape as the great gilded throne whose arms he clutched for fear he would fall—fall upward—seemed anything but stationary on its seemingly rapidly revolving dais. And yet, even as Harmon's internal organs could find within him no grasp on the force of gravity, even as his eyes and ears and mind were filled with multicolored, multi-sounded swirls and rentings in their very fabrics, even as the world itself appeared to be coming apart at the seams . . .

They stood there before him, the two of them, these enemies of ancient times. They stood as if carved from two mountains, the woman a combination of pearl and rubies, the man of ivory and ebony. Only in their eyes was there movement. Within their depths, bolts of lightning crashed, stars were born and flamed out to ash, dark worlds emitted waves of black death. Again and again and again and again . . .

How long this violent, dangerously unbalanced state of the cosmos was maintained, Harmon had no idea. Suddenly, however, he could hear his own panting breathing, his own blood pulsing through his temples.

All else was quiet. As silent as death itself. The walls of the room, its torchlights, the dais, and the

thrones that topped it, all were stable. In the stillness, Dracula laughed.

"You did not answer my question, my lady. How do you expect to triumph this time? We have had similar contests before, and they always have turned out the same."

No anger showed itself on Sabor's face. If anything, it seemed to Harmon that she was fully confident. "There is a difference this time, my lord. You will, for example, note the absence of your little she-friend. She cannot help you this time."

"True, but the advantage I might have gained through her aid is offset by the advantage I *do* gain by your effort to keep her where she is. You will need a stronger trump card than that."

"A trump card?" she repeated. "The analogy is excellent. Yes, I believe that is exactly what I have. Your friend, the professor—he is my trump card. I should say, he is *one* of my trump cards."

"The professor . . ."

"All day I have been wondering—for longer than this day, but especially after being in close contact with Professor Harmon—I have asked myself repeatedly about that crippled old man. It was he who freed you from your death-trance, yet he continues to live. A markedly different state from others who have awakened you. Why? What special bond is there between Dracul or Dracula—what tie—between the so-noble Lord of Darkness and this puny human being?"

She smiled at Harmon, then returned her eyes to the vampire.

"Now it is you who do not answer me! And yet, I

shall be answered, if not by you in words, then by the result of a very simple experiment. See, my old enemy, if you can stop your friend from dying!”

Her eyes focused past the count, fixed on one of the lance bearers against the wall behind him. The man took two steps forward—and cocked his arm, lifting back the long spear, the tip of which was pointed toward the crippled man on the throne.

The vampire whirled, his own eyes flashing.

The mindless one with the spear froze.

“Excellent,” Sabor said. “But there are other spears within this place. See now, just how effective are your powers!”

As one man, the throng lining the walls of the room snapped into motion. All spears were up, all points on the same target, awaiting only a mental command before Harmon would be skewered from all points of the compass.

And now the vampire’s arms rose above his head, his long tapered fingers seeming to trace forbidden symbols in the space around him. Again Harmon could feel the air in the room begin to move, shoved about by some electrical force foreign to the atmosphere. Yet this time there was a sense of strain, a sense of depletion of the force.

The spear bearers . . .

Two of them, from opposite sides of the hall, threw their weapons. Harmon instinctively closed his eyes, then forced them open again. If this was to be the time of his death, he would face it like a man. Yet, even as he restored sight to himself, he realized that something was wrong—or right, depending on

one's viewpoint. By now, one of those two spears should have found its target.

The spears, both of them, clattered to the floor. It was not so much that each missed its target—both simply fell far short of the necessary distance, their trajectories ending before passing half the way to the dais.

And now there were other spears in the air, all of them falling short, because all of them . . .

All of them were being thrown as if halfheartedly—as if in, yes, *slow motion*!

Sabor's eyes flashed angrily. Those of her retainers who still held their weapons brought them back to their original upright positions. The others, those whose hands were empty, merely stood in an attitude of attention.

"The Dark Prince strains his capacity," Sabor laughed harshly. "But he accomplishes his task. *Bravo*, my lord. You have temporarily stayed my hand from executing the old man. He, however, is not of all that much importance to me. I shall therefore forgo the pleasure of his death until after the main event of the evening. Prepare yourself, Prince, for it is time. The time has now come for your destruction at the hands of my slaves. And this time, though your powers be enough to hold their movements to slowness, they shall reach their target—*they shall prevail*!"

Again moving as one man, the mind-slaves of Sabor turned. Those who still carried weapons dropped them carelessly as, with those who were empty-handed, they bent down to the floor behind them. Harmon now could see that, in the shadows where floor met

wall, yards of dark gray fabric lined the room. It was this fabric that the robotlike hands now moved, but it was the implements hidden beneath the fabric that the hands were after. As the gray-robed figures straightened and turned, Harmon's heart nearly stopped.

Dracula roared with pure rage, his hands moving to shield his eyes.

And the mind-slaves of Sabor slowly stepped forward, forming a closed circle, slowly tightening, each one of them holding a portion of the vampire's doom.

Each one holding a large, brightly shining cross.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In the flaming dungeon room, Ktara suddenly screamed. "Stop her! You must stop her! It soon will be over, unless you—"

But she couldn't continue, her exhausted body again collapsing against Cam's naked chest. "Please . . ."

"I can't leave you," he said.

"I'll . . . be . . ." *All right.* She completed the message mentally, or Cam thought that she had. He could no longer think straight at all. He knew, though, that the woman expected him to leave her, and to do so as quickly as he could. She no longer had the power to protect him, not while these flames continued to . . .

He knew something else, too. That during the past quarter of an hour, he had been supplying her with strength. Not just the physical presence of his body, but something else, something he couldn't explain.

He felt the presence of Ktara in his mind, felt her taking sustenance from him. It was not the kind of taking he associated with the vampire, not that; there was no feeling of his being drained of . . . of anything. It was a kind of agreement. Yes, that was it. Her thoughts had mingled with his, had asked to be allowed to share for a time his mental strength, and he had mentally agreed that, yes, he would give her that help. A mutual kind of . . .

Sympathy—the way Harmon had spoken of the term. This was it, the thing Cam really had not understood. And now he wondered whether or not the professor *really* understood—

Harmon. If he was alive, he was in the witch's power. But he had to be alive, for if he wasn't, the vampire would be dead. But Cam's loyalty was not to Dracula, far from it. Harmon, however . . .

But what could *he* do? Even if he could get through those flames alive, even if his scorched frame still had the strength necessary to find the others . . .

How could he leave this woman who now was so dependent upon him?

And then he knew that he wanted to try. He knew because the way he asked the question had changed—subtly—but, nevertheless, substantively. It no longer was that he could *not* leave her, but how he could square it with his conscience. But could he do that?

He was wasting time, he knew that, too—almost purposely wasting time. Why? he asked himself. What was holding him back from . . .

Coward.

"No," he said aloud, saying it to the half-closed green eyes that now were looking into his own.

Coward and fool.

"No." His voice was low in pitch, but there was hardness behind it.

And a vain fool at that. You have the vanity to think that I need you—I! Go and help your professor whom you have the power to help!

He was suddenly on his feet. She was right—the bitch was right. He was a vain fool to think that she might . . .

But he was no coward! If he had to die to prove that to her . . .

Vanity again! What the hell did she care whether he lived or died? Or how he lived or died? The main thing was that he himself cared. Without another look at the woman, whose head now rested upon her own knees, he steeled himself.

He steeled himself and dove through Hell.

The intense heat struck him even before the top part of his body actually touched the licking flames, and then he was immersed in the roaring holocaust, the water streaming from his skin, his brain roasting behind closed eyes that themselves felt as if they would burst like two popping grapes in boiling water. And then came the collision, his scorched hands somehow automatically spreading out before his face to take the brunt of his crash to the ice-cold stone beyond the wall of flame, then automatically grasping for holds to allow him to crawl completely through the doorway and away from the . . .

He rolled over onto his back, his eyes opening painfully. The lids no doubt were festered with flesh-

peeling burns, but the eyes could see, if only in blurred patterns of leaping shadows and light. He held his forearms up into his range of vision and could feel the juices within his throat revolt from the scorched sight of his own limbs. He had seen burn victims before and knew that if the rest of his body was like this, he'd have at most an hour more to live. An hour, but that might be time enough if . . .

He turned over onto his stomach, stabs of pain slicing through his chest and shoulders, but the coolness of the floor sending a strange shiver throughout his system. His hands flat on the floor now, he pushed himself upward, bringing his knees under his body. He stood and staggered two steps forward. And then . . .

It began with his eyes. They slowly started to clear, or seemed to—he couldn't believe what he was seeing with them. What they were seeing were his own hands. The blackened, scorch-festered . . .

They no longer were that way! Slowly, his hands, his arms, his chest were returning to what they had been before.

Of course! The fire was spectral! The wounds, now that he had lived through receiving them—they too would be spectral. He had been a damned fool! At any time, he could have . . .

He checked his right shoulder. No, that burn was not going away. The branded black S still remained. His teeth clenched.

All right, Sabor, you've had your fun. Now maybe it's my turn.

Maybe. He knew he'd have to find her first—and fast!

"Soon, my prince—soon my revenge will be complete!" Sabor laughed. "The symbol of your doom, that symbol that from ancient days you shrink from, surrounds you completely. There is no avenue of escape, no clear route for you to skulk your way from its presence. Rage, my lord—shriek out if you wish! The sound will be as music to my ears."

Again the red-haired witch laughed, now turning her cruel smile upward toward Harmon. "You see, Professor. The victory needs but the final thrust. I have decided to let you view the end of the one you call Count Dracula."

The end indeed looked very near. The vampire had been flushed to the center of the room, directly before the dais. Within the circle of the now-stationary cross bearers, he lay as if felled by some mighty blow, his right hand supporting him somewhat while his left arm shielded his eyes from the bright symbols of his doom. The cross, Harmon thought to himself. A symbol that had meant one thing to millions upon millions of Christians for almost two centuries, but a symbol far older than that, one whose original meaning Harmon did not know, perhaps never would know. But that it was a symbol of power he knew full well. He had always supposed that it was a symbol of good power—if in fact the distinction between evil and good had any real meaning. Dracula once had told him that it did not, that evil and good were nothing more than labels that humans used to justify their actions. Perhaps, but regardless of the rightness or wrongness of the power of the cross, that power was there, and it was sufficient to hold the

vampire—or whatever in truth Count Dracula really was—completely at bay.

Sabor now was enjoying herself in full, taunting her captive in tones that alternated between the over-solicitous and the triumphant.

“Your control over yourself is weakening, my prince. Soon there will be no control at all. Shall I tell you what will happen then? The stake, you think? A stout stake of wood, sharpened to a fine point and thrust into your heart? It would give me pleasure to see that, my lord, but no. That kind of death for you is no death at all. It is but a temporary interlude, not an ending, and what I wish for you, what I plan for you, is total extinction.”

She pointed toward one of the dark window-slits. “From there will come your finish. You shall lie here for all the hours of night, powerless to move. And when, in the morning, the first rays of the sun stream through, as the night fades before the dawn, *you* shall fade before my joyous eyes—fade forever into the ether that surrounds this world, to become a gray shade that inhabits no world at all, an immortal nothing. Once, my lord, you could have joined me in the domination of this planet, a domination that is soon to be, but you showed me nothing but treachery. Now—”

She whipped around suddenly to face the open doorway—and the man standing openmouthed within it.

“My God!” Alexandru Thorka cried.

He stood as if stunned, which perhaps he was. In the past half hour his mind had reached the point of

near-saturation with the sight of horror after horror. The roadway leading to the castle . . .

He'd passed the Fiat far down the mountainside. Not much farther along the way, he found the first of the dead bodies. He had rushed from the minibus, dreading to look into the faces of those first men, dreading that he might find among them the young Puerto Rican and the dark woman. But no, the strangely costumed men were unknown to him, as were the others he inspected. And even though the way these men had died—mostly from bullet wounds—was far less dramatic than the way he suspected the two who still shared the minibus with him had died, the cumulative impressions of corpse after corpse were beginning to sicken him. Not just physically, but mentally. So much death . . .

He had planned to get rid of those two mangled bodies, but found that he could not touch either of them. So easy just to dump them among the others, a simple physical task, but his fingers shrank from the job. As for the crated coffin and the dark soil that lay at its bottom . . .

He had come to a decision about that, one that he hoped was not wrong. Time only would tell, perhaps a very short time. Time . . .

He knew that it was reckless of him to continue upward in the Volkswagen, knew that it would be more easily spotted than a man on foot. But he also knew that a man on foot, especially a man of his girth, would not be able to reach the top of the mountain for another hour. So he took the chance, driving the minibus straight on and upward, expecting at any moment to be blasted into oblivion. But nothing

and no one threatened him, even as he cut the motor of the vehicle and stepped onto the cobblestones of the castle courtyard. He stood and listened. Nothing, except from somewhere far up above . . .

Some kind of music. Many voices singing or chanting. It sounded very far away, muffled. Even so, the sound made his flesh crawl.

As did the open entryway into the castle proper. A black gap, beyond which was a dark nothingness. A great open mouth of some animate beast, waiting for him to enter its jaws . . .

He wished now that he had a weapon, anything. Perhaps he should have taken a sword from one of the dead men on the hill below. But it was too late now. Besides, there was no really effective weapon against the real dangers inside these walls. Even so, a pistol would have been a welcome companion. Such a weapon at the very least would be effective against an attack by costumed swordsmen, would it not? But he had none, and indeed it appeared he had no need for such a thing. The interior hall was empty of attackers, as were the stairs he took upward. The darkness was broken only by shades of gray coming through the fissures in the windows he now and then passed. But the singing . . . it was a little louder now . . .

The singing stopped.

And so did Thorka. Suddenly his feet would not carry him along, would go no higher. He felt as if frozen to the spot, then immediately felt as if the spot itself were in motion. In the light that already was weak, the shapes and shadows around him blurred even more. Inside his head there were the be-

ginnings of total disorientation. A wave of nausea overcame him, followed by another. He sank to his knees, then even lower, his hands grasping for some kind of firm hold upon this stone-carved staircase that suddenly resembled nothing so much as it did some kind of thrill ride at a carnival. And then, as quickly as these feelings had come to him, they were over.

The universe began to breathe normally. There was but the silence of death within Thorka's ears. Then there was something else. Voices. Heard dimly, from above him, he could not make out the words. A woman's voice, shrill, then mockingly soft. A man's voice, imperious and rich—as some spirit of doom. Louder they became as Thorka continued his upward climb. And then there was another sound.

The sound of feet other than his, feet moving swiftly, their soles meeting stone.

The stone of the staircase—below where he now stood! In the darkness below, right now, far below, someone was . . .

He urged his legs to carry him faster, his brow now suddenly wet with drops of cold sweat. Upward, upward, and then . . .

He had reached the level of the voices. There, at the end of the long hall, the open doorway and the flickering light beyond it.

He swallowed hard and moved as quickly as he could, his feet again not wishing to cooperate, communicating to his brain that what he was forcing them to do was wrong, that what waited beyond that doorway was something to leave alone, something that he would wish later never to have seen. The pre-

cognition was entirely accurate, as Thorka learned when the scene on the other side of the open doorway slammed into his brain.

In the flickering torchlight, the raised thrones, one of which held Harmon . . . Circled around them, the gray-robed figures holding shining crosses . . . At the base of the dais a black figure, a crumpled man . . . and then, suddenly turning upon him, it was the woman who—

"My God!" he cried. His mind blanked out as he felt himself falling.

Harmon saw it immediately, the one chance any of them had. The risk . . .

But damn the risk! To act and fail could bring no worse fate down upon their heads than failure to act at all. And now, now that her attention had been momentarily distracted . . .

No avenue of escape—that was her way of putting it to the cringing vampire. Well, there was a way such an avenue could be made—and he could make it!

He moved like lightning, his strong hands gripping the arms of the wheelchair that rested against his throne. In one fluid motion he brought it up over his head and, with the strength of his bull-like shoulders, sent it hurtling downward before him.

As the missile thudded into three of the gray-robed figures, the implements they carried—the shining crosses—clattered to the stone surface.

"Count!" he shouted.

"Your doom, Harmon!" Sabor cried, the index fin-

ger of her right hand snapping up toward his head as if it had been a pistol.

"No—yours!"

The rejoinder had come from the figure in black, whose eyes shone red through the opening Harmon had given him. His lips curled back into a smile as he lifted himself to his knees and, warding off the sight of the crosses that surrounded him on all sides except for directly before him, he rose completely upright.

"You, Sabor—your powers are limited as are mine. You cannot destroy the professor without losing control over your mindless ones."

"But I can!" she countered. "I will kill him!"

"And then?" Dracula asked softly. "And then what of me? I come for you, Sabor."

"I will kill him—I *will*!"

"You'll *try*, lady!"

The new challenge, which came not an instant too soon, came from the doorway. Sabor stiffened. The old man who had been there had dropped, unconscious. How could he . . .

She whirled—just as the bullet-headed giant launched the sharp-pointed lance. Then she screamed as the steel entered her body, just under her rib cage, and sent a gusher of blood from the place the point had emerged from her back. Her face contorted in pain as her hands gripped the shaft that had penetrated her.

"You fool! Sabor is not destroyed by the weapons of man."

"That is right," Count Dracula said.

"You—"

But she stopped, seeing now that the gray-robed figures who had been her slaves now all had crumpled to the floor. Count Dracula smiled. "*My slaves!*" she screamed. "Rise, take up your weapons and—"

"But no, my dear," the count said. "They can no longer obey you. You have lost control. The spear Mr. Sanchez sent through your body has done its work. In that instant when you suffered shock, your slaves became mine. They remain mine, although I have no use for them."

Frantically, staggering back to the wall, Sabor screamed commands at her fallen warriors. "*Rise—attack him!*"

"They no longer hear you," said a new voice from the doorway.

Ktara smiled cruelly. "I thank you, Sabor, for my release. I would not like to have missed your finish."

"No—*no!* It shall not end this way, not this time—it shall *not!*"

But already the transformation of Dracula had begun. The hairline moving down the forehead, the eyebrows growing together, the flattening of the nostrils, the lips curling back over teeth that lengthened into . . .

The horrible fangs paused before her throat.

"It appears you have lost some blood," he said, smiling into her terrified eyes.

Her shriek dinned from the walls of the high-ceilinged hall as he took her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“You must think me a fool,” Thorka said.

Several hours had passed. The Romanian and his American friend sat over cognac in the latter’s room. The warmth of the room as well as that of the brandy were welcome to both men. The Romanian’s remark, however, was not.

“A fool, Alex? Hardly. If it had not been for you—”

“I passed out, Damien. Just at the point when I was needed, I passed out.”

“You’d been through quite an ordeal,” Harmon observed. “The mind knows when it has withstood enough, I find.”

Thorka swirled the amber liquid around the bottom of the snifter. He was quiet for a moment, then:

“Do you intend telling me, Damien?”

Harmon rubbed his jaw reflectively. “I think you know all there is to tell already.”

The Romanian shook his head. “Know? No, I do

not know. You have said merely that the woman called Sabor is no longer a threat. You have not given me your reasons for this conclusion."

"It is being handled now."

Yes, Thorka thought. Handled now. Just as the disappearance of Petre Ulescu's remains and those of all of Sabor's victims were being "handled now" somewhere upon that dark hillside. "So many deaths," he said. "So many . . . people whose fates never will be known by those who loved them and will wonder for years to come . . ."

"You would prefer the story be told?"

"No, I suppose not. But so many . . ."

Harmon nodded. "There might have been many more, Alex." He looked at his old friend meaningfully.

"I know that." He looked at his pocket watch. It was just after two in the morning. He put the watch back.

"Where is it, Alex?" Harmon asked quietly. "What did you do with it?"

Thorka rose to his feet and stepped to the window. "You really don't have to ask me, do you, Damien? Your woman friend, Ktara. You once told me that among her abilities is that of mind reading. Could she not find out for you what you want to know?"

"I'd like you to tell me."

"And why is that? Is it that you wish me to be an accomplice in this dark business of yours?"

"You already are, Alex. From the very beginning, you assisted me, knowing full well what I was up to."

"That is only partly true. I have long suspected—"

"You know and have known."

Thorka sighed. "Very well. Still, I myself was not actively involved. If I sinned, it was one of omission, not one of commission. If it now is in my hands to allow or to stop the dark count, the responsibility is one that lays heavily upon me. The vampire, Damien, is a foul creature, one spawned in Hell itself."

Harmon shook his head. "Things are not that simple. I think you know that, too."

"I know that you *think* you know what you are doing. Using something inherently evil to do good. To fight other evils."

The Romanian reached for the bottle of cognac and filled his snifter halfway. It was a stiff jolt of liquor, and so was the gulp he took. But it seemed to relax the expression upon his face.

"I am thought to be a rather clever logician, Damien. My reputation has been made from demonstrations of what is known as keen insight. My reputation, perhaps, has not been fully deserved. On the one hand, I recognize your mission. On the other, I deplore your means. If the power lies in me to destroy this foul murderer—those two young men, Damien, *horrible!*—then perhaps I should use that power. I think I should be using it for good. Do you disagree?"

"Yes. While creatures such as Sabor walk the earth, I do disagree."

Thorka turned sharply toward Harmon. "But he—*he* is such a creature!"

"Tell me, Alex, is a pistol an evil thing?"

"Yes, by its very nature. It is a device created to destroy."

“And the pistol carried by the policeman who uses it to defend the innocent?”

“Regardless of good intent, the device itself is evil.”

Harmon smiled grimly. “Our philosophies differ, Alex.”

“So it would seem. Primarily because, to use your analogy, one cannot always trust in the integrity of the policeman carrying the pistol. No man is above misusing such an instrument, whether or not by intention.”

“I agree. Where is the crate?”

Thorka gulped down another mouthful of the cognac. Then he moved again to the window. “There are fires on the mountain,” he said slowly. “The fires of purification?”

“You might say that. Tell me what I want to know, Alex.”

Sighing audibly, Thorka told him.

The muscles of the bullet-headed giant strained against the oars of the large rowboat, which quietly approached the middle of the Rhine. Between the two who sat upright in the boat was the long transparent box sealed with the bloodred seal of Dracula. Within the box was a naked woman. A beautiful red-haired woman whose features were relaxed in the depths of sleep. Around the transparent box itself were lengths of weighted chain.

Cam Sanchez looked from the box upward to the mountaintop, which tonight seemed to rule the entire region. The fires were barely visible now, which meant that the last of the bodies were being con-

sumed. By dawn, there would be no trace in the great castle nor in its nearby grounds of the things that had happened there recently. There would be ash, and that would be all.

He thought now of Ktara's master and of the dirt-filled casket that Thorka had hidden. If he were Thorka, what would he have done? And would he tell what he had done, now that the present danger was over? He didn't know. He did know, however, that at the end of this month the agreement between Harmon and the vampire was over. Expired. Did he—Cameron Sanchez—want the count to expire before there was a chance for him to . . . He didn't know. Much—all—depended upon what Harmon wanted. Could the professor continue to control the fiend indefinitely? What would happen if, suddenly . . .

He shook off the thought. He was weary, feeling very old but somehow not very wise. In a world of powerful beings, he felt very insignificant. He strained against the oars even more, refusing to look at the green-eyed woman, concentrating upon the physical act itself. And upon the flawless body of Sabor.

The spear had been removed. Where it had entered her chest, where it had exited, there now were no signs. The wounds had healed miraculously. No, *miracle* was hardly a proper word. "She cannot be killed," Ktara had told him. "All that can be done is what has been done in the past." And Cam had watched as the vampire carried the red-haired witch to another small room, in the center of which was this box that was now in the rowboat. He had not thought to ask where it had come from, and though

he wondered now, he was too tired to care. It was enough that it was there, enough that the words the count spoke—words in some foul ancient tongue—accomplished their job, enough that the wax seal from his golden signet ring was effective in its way as well.

So damned weary, and more work before him this night, work to prepare for a departure as soon as possible after dawn.

“We are here,” Ktara said.

The oars were brought into the boat.

The transparent box, its flawless contents shifting only slightly, sank quickly out of sight toward the bottom of the cold river.

“We are here,” Cam repeated. “And she—she is there. For how long, I wonder.”

Ktara’s voice sounded like a death knell. “For however long, Mr. Sanchez, be sure of one thing. It will not be for long enough.”

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The Blood Countess

One afternoon a fine, strong young man named Janos strayed too far into the solemn hills above his tiny Hungarian village. Suddenly he came upon an ancient castle, a dark, mysterious place where, according to legend, a young woman had been murdered many years before.

Venturing down into the cavernous dungeons, Janos discovered the legendary bed chamber. If the stories were true...this was the place! The place where Elizabeth Bathory had been walled up to die!

Then he saw it. A small skeleton crumpled before a massive iron gateway. Was it Elizabeth Bathory? Fighting a desire to turn and run, Janos crept past the bleached bones to the inner chamber. There, in the center of the room, was a huge, dust-covered glass box.

Trembling, he wiped the dust away. His eyes widened with horror. Inside was the body of a beautiful naked woman!

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